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TUNED TO THE SOURCE:
AN EXPLORATION OF QUEER SEXUALITY AND SPIRITUALITY IN LEATHER, LIFE and SCRIPTURE

BY

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Master of Divinity, Pacific School of Religion, 1990

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2010

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DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to my partner, Sarah-Helen Land.
Her unconditional love, unwavering belief in me, and constant support empowered me to complete this project.

I am grateful beyond description for the gifts of her strength, courage, integrity, sense of humor, spiritual maturity, and profound wisdom that enabled me to keep writing on the days when writing seemed utterly impossible.

Above all others, she has taught me the meaning of the words:

"I am my Beloved's, and my Beloved is mine."

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Introduction:
What's a Nice Southern Baptist Girl Doing in a Thesis Like This?

For the past 21 years I have served in ministry within the context of Metropolitan Community Churches (MCC), a Christian denomination that primarily serves members of the gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender (GLBT) community. During these two decades within MCC I have gained great respect for the breadth, depth, diversity, and transformational power of two forces that profoundly shape and impact our lives: human sexuality and spirituality. In the lives of the people in the churches I have served I have seen how sexuality and spirituality can bring great joy, pleasure, healing, energy, compassion, and personal growth when they are allowed to exist and complement one another in a unified way in our bodies and lives. I have watched gay men and lesbian women cry uncontrollably during their initial MCC worship services when they hear for the first time that they don't have to choose between their sexual orientation and their relationship with God. I have seen transgender folk come into their own power in MCC as they hear the affirming message that they, too, are created in the image of the Divine. I have seen joy on the faces of members of the leather community in worship services where the colors of the leather flag are present on the communion table, and where congregants wearing leather are leading the service. I have felt indescribable vitality and spiritual energy swell in a church sanctuary filled with the singing of all kinds of voices: polyamorous voices, BDSM voices, bisexual and pansexual voices, lesbian and gay voices, monogamous voices, heterosexual voices, single voices, married voices, and transgender voices. I have watched lives change in very positive ways and deep spiritual

wounds heal when people hear and receive the message, *in church, from the pulpit, and at the communion table,* that what they do sexually and how they express their gender in their lives are things God wants us to love about ourselves.

Conversely, I have also seen what great damage and pain are caused when we are forced to choose between our sexual desires and our spiritual self, when saying "yes" to ourselves as same-gender loving and/or transgender people requires that we believe that God does not love us, or that we are not allowed to pursue a spiritual life because our sexual orientation or expression of gender are inherently sinful. I have watched people break under the strain of having to choose between MCC church family and the acceptance of their biological family, between God's love and their love for their same-gendered partner, between their calling to vocational ministry and their calling to live as a leatherperson, between what gives them sexual pleasure and what fills them with spiritual power. For the most part the people I have seen wounded in these ways most deeply have come from very conservative or fundamentalist Christian backgrounds; however, I have also seen the ways all of us within MCC are hurt on a daily basis because we live in a culture saturated by homo- and transphobia built on conservative religious beliefs from many different traditions.

Both of these realities speak to me deeply because I have experienced each in my lifetime. For the first 23 years of my life I was a very good Southern Baptist girl. I was "saved" from my sins through the blood of Jesus Christ in the fundamentalist Bible-Baptist church of my childhood at the age of 8, I attended worship services and played the piano regularly at a fundamentalist Baptist church throughout high school, and I

graduated from Oklahoma Baptist University (a Southern Baptist college) at the age of 22 in Shawnee, Oklahoma. I was devoted to being a good student, a good daughter, and a very good Christian. At the same time, I lived in absolute terror that one day I might have to admit to myself that I was attracted to other girls, or much worse, that others would find out this terrible truth about me. I spent all of those years in desperate prayer, begging God to change me, to take away the sinful feelings, and to make me "normal." Even as I lived every day with a passionate love for God and for Jesus in my heart, I also lived with the devastating belief that God hated me, and that because of my feelings for other girls that I could not make go away, I was going to spend eternity in hell. Every day I felt as though I was being ripped apart and forced to choose between my spiritual longings and my growing erotic desires.

When I came out as a lesbian at the age of 23 and discovered MCC, it was as if I was given a whole new life. I could worship in church *and* talk openly about being attracted to other women! I could sing the old Christian evangelical hymn "Just As I Am" and know that I didn't have to change or hide anything from God or anyone else to be accepted and loved. Finally, after so many years of self-loathing and fear, I could love God, Jesus, women, and myself; it was all a miracle that seemed too good to be true. Although it did take many years in MCC to heal from the multiple layers of religious wounds I sustained when I was younger, the healing did gradually happen, and at all kinds of sexual and spiritual levels. Particularly when I began serving as an intern at MCC San Francisco in 1995 I began to expand my understanding of the Divine and faith traditions outside of Christianity. I also began to explore my own spirituality and

sexuality in new ways in the affirming environment of MCC San Francisco and the sexually adventurous setting of the Bay Area. I allowed my spiritual practices and beliefs to be informed and enhanced by practices and belief systems other than Christianity, just as I also discovered BDSM and the leather community that nurtured and fed me in both body and soul.

Today I am a very different person than I was 21 years ago when I made the decision to come out to myself and to the rest of my world. Although at times I still struggle with the homophobic conditioning of my Christian fundamentalist past, I live my life openly, proudly (some might say brazenly), and gratefully as the poly-spiritual, Christian, Butch lesbian, leatherdyke senior minister of the Metropolitan Community Church of San Francisco (MCCSF). I have a passionately close relationship with Jesus, I pray to the God and Goddess of many names who created me in her/his image, I worship with my voice, mind, heart, and body in MCCSF services and with my Femme lesbian lover who has shown me the heart and soul of the Divine in ways I never thought possible. The queer humor and sensibility of my community makes me laugh and find joy in life every day, just as the many experiences of both external and internalized homophobia I witness in my congregation every week break my heart. Most days I am able to love myself and others with abundance, and I live a life full of sexual pleasure and fulfillment, spiritual adventure, commitment to creating social justice, and all the rich, complex blessings and challenges that come with being intimately involved in spiritual community. *All* of this has happened to me and within me over time through the healing power that permeated my being when my sexuality and spirituality were finally allowed

to coexist in my body, soul, and life. Precisely because of this, my own personal lived experience, as well as the life experiences I have witnessed in my congregation, I have come to believe that there is a profound healing power that is created specifically when we are able to encounter the union of sexuality and spirituality within our bodies and lives.

Contrary to what some of us may have been taught in our religious traditions, there are ways to claim this power through queer, womanist/feminist, and sex/pleasure-positive interpretations of Jewish and Christian scriptures. In discovering this power it is essential to explore a sex-positive interpretation of scripture because so many of us who identify as queer have been deeply wounded by its use, particularly by the Religious Right, to demonize who we are as sexual beings. It is for this reason that LGBT people often reject their own spirituality altogether; they have been told so often that the Bible condemns who they are and what brings them pleasure and joy that they know of no other way to conceptualize of either scripture or spirituality other than as things to be both feared and avoided at all costs. To take the Bible and re-define and reclaim it as a source of affirmation and celebration of human sexuality and the erotic is to offer a new possibility for queer people to consider the place of spirituality in their lives, and how it intersects with their sexuality.

For some of us, there are also ways to discover this power through the practice of SM (sadomasochism) and Ds (domination and submission) in relation to spirituality. SM and Ds are often labeled as "violence" or "perversion." Thomas Peterson, who writes of his spiritual experiences as a gay leatherman, states that, "Suggesting that many

leathermen seek and find spiritual liberation through such rites will seem odd to most people, blasphemous to others, and perverse to some. Gay men who enter the leather world find it difficult to share their experiences openly with friends, both gay and straight alike, because of deeply held suspicions and prejudices."[1] Yet many of us who practice SM and/or Ds have found them to be sources of both tremendous physical pleasure and spiritual joy. Similar to the experience of LGBT people, many who are drawn to this type of sexuality often do not allow themselves to explore it in their lives due to shame borne of stereotypes and ignorance about what SM and Ds really are. Thus they are cut off from sexual experiences that might also turn out to be great sources of spiritual discovery as well. When those who are so inclined receive accurate information about SM and DS, and when they hear the stories and experiences of queer people whose sexual and spiritual lives have been positively impacted by leathersex, they are often able to create space in their lives for exploration that can lead to a new discovery of the healing power found in the union of sexuality and spirituality.

In my thesis I will explore this particular healing power, sharing evidence of how it is transformational in the lives of queer people, and demonstrating where evidence of it can be found in scripture. I am linking the two – transformational experience and scripture – because I believe it is the disconnect between both that continues to perpetuate the woundedness I see in my congregation. For queer people whose lives have been negatively impacted by the influence of the Bible, embracing the positive value of our

[1]Thomas V. Peterson, "Gay Men's Spiritual Experience in the Leather Community," *Gay Religion* ed. Scott Thumma and Edward R. Gray (Walnut Creek: AltaMira Press, 2005), 337.

sexual experiences can be extremely challenging. We need to know that the spiritual wisdom, growth, and insight we receive through sex can actually be something we can use to enhance our understanding of the Bible. Furthermore, if we can replace that negative biblical influence with a knowledge that the Bible actually includes passages that celebrate sexuality (and see ourselves reflected in those passages), then embracing and celebrating our own experience of sex becomes more of a possibility in our lives as well.

In attempting to adequately consider such a broad topic, I recognize that there are a number of limitations that impact this thesis. The first is my own social location as a white, 44-year old, poly-spiritual, able-bodied Christian lesbian from a working class background who grew up in a fundamentalist home in North America. Particularly through the voices of the authors of color I will cite in this thesis, I have become even more aware that I have never directly experienced the racism that pervades our society, nor have I directly experienced the racism that is pervasive in SM communities. As a woman, I have certainly experienced the sexism that is very present all around me, and especially within the gay male SM community. No matter the race, gender, or sexual orientation of the authors I will cite, I will do so with the ever-present understanding that I am both ignorant and wise with regard to many realities. It is my intent to work throughout my life on my own racism, classism, anti-Semitism, and ableism, but I also know that there are so many life experiences of others that I will never comprehend as fully as I do my own. It is my intention that I will speak from the truth of my own life in this thesis, and that I will not project or impose this truth onto the lives of others whose

experiences of oppression are different from my own. It is also my hope that my writing will reflect the understanding, wisdom, and respect I have gained through my research that has enabled me to hear the written voices of queer authors from many backgrounds and different walks of life. Every author included in this work has taught me something through the truth of their own lives and work, and for this I am very grateful.

Primarily because of the limitations on the length of this thesis, I will not be providing a scriptural analysis of homosexuality and the Bible beyond what is necessary to place it in the context of the topic of human sexuality within the Bible in general. My starting point will be the understanding that there is nothing in the Bible that condemns same-sex relationships and same-gender sexual practices *as we know them in the twenty-first century*. Also, while I believe the matters pertaining to sexuality and spirituality I will explore have the potential to impact the lives of people of all spiritual traditions and sexual orientations, my work will focus on those who are drawn most clearly to the Jewish and Christian traditions and who identify as queer (gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, polyamorous or non-monogamous).

Finally, while I hope to paint a vivid and accurate picture of the basic nature and characteristics of SM and Ds, this thesis will not be an in-depth analysis of every type of Ds or SM activity, nor will it be an exhaustive ethical or moral analysis of either. While I will attempt to share with the reader the reasons I believe that both can be an important part of a healthy spiritual life, this work will not be a structured defense of either one. I will start and continue throughout from the assumption that SM and Ds can be gifts and positive forces for sexual and spiritual growth and healing.

Throughout this thesis I will use a number of terms with which the reader may or may not be familiar. These terms include words and abbreviations such as *queer, leather, leatherdyke, BDSM, SM, Ds, poly-spiritual*, and others. I recommend turning to appendix one for a list of definitions for these terms before beginning chapter one.

One foundational truth taught by feminism is that "the personal is political." My own life and my reading of feminist theologians have also taught me that the personal is spiritual and theological as well. For me and for so many of the queer people in MCC, our ability to claim our sexual and spiritual power began with our decision to trust the goodness, joy, pleasure, and connection with the Divine that we discovered through our own personal, lived experiences. It is for this reason that I both begin and end the chapters of this thesis with the powerful truth of queer lives, including my own, that of authors I will cite, and that of a number of individuals who generously allowed me to interview them about the meaning of sexuality and spirituality to them. In chapter one I will turn to SM and Ds as conduits for sexual and spiritual healing for those who wish to explore these practices, and how each can contribute to our ability to love ourselves, God, and others. In chapter four I offer the wisdom, hope, and healing power found in the stories of those who identify as queer and Jewish, Christian, or spiritual about what the union of sexuality and spirituality has meant to them in their lives and their contribution to our world.

Because the Bible has often been the source of deep wounding for queer people, I will continue my exploration of sexual and spiritual power in this thesis with a look at Hebrew and Christian scriptures. This examination will include reflection upon various

authors' writings on the life of Jesus, including from a Gnostic perspective, to reveal the positive evidence of eroticism in Jesus' life that is present there. Having seen indications of the great damage that has been done through the misuse of scripture by Christianity to GLBT people in particular, and to Western society at large in general, I take very seriously what I see as the need to re-interpret and re-claim this same source if possible. I appreciate the synopsis of this historical influence of Christianity (buttressed by scripture) provided by Daniel C. Maguire, along with his sense of humor:

> The inability to face our sexuality, in Western culture, is to a great extent religiously grounded, with historical Christianity bearing enormous blame. Augustine saw sexual passion as the conduit of original sin, so heinous and infectious that the passion of parents that led to conception befouls the souls of newborns. Ambrose said the worldly marry but the children of the Kingdom of Heaven refrain from all fleshly lust. The Penitentials – early medieval books listing sins and their appropriate penances – prescribed that during times of prayer and on religious feasts, there must be no sexual activity. Thomas Aquinas conceded that marriage was a sacrament, but he said it was the least and last of the sacraments because it had the least spirituality. Sexual pleasure, even in marriage, was long thought to be sinful. And the rule was, the more pleasure, the more sin. William of Auxerre in the thirteenth century said that a holy man who has sex with his wife and finds it hateful and disgusting commits no sin. He added, with regret, "this, however, seldom happens.[2]

Although there are many days I have more doubt than hope, I continue to hold faith that sex-positive interpretations of scripture might actually offer the possibility of sexual and spiritual healing and wholeness for both those individuals and parts of society that have been so wounded by misuse of the Bible. If sex-negative teachings within Christianity can do such damage, then surely sex-positive interpretations of scripture could help to heal this damage on a scale that is just as great. I have seen instances of this healing in my congregation too many times to doubt its existence or its power. It is for this reason

[2] Maguire, Daniel C. 2004. Sex and the Sacred. *Crosscurrents* 54, no. 3 (Fall): 23-30.

that chapters two and three of this thesis are focused on what I believe to be evidence of the power of sexuality and spirituality together, first in chapter two with *The Song of Songs*, then continuing in chapter three with the life of Jesus. I will examine erotic power as I believe it is demonstrated in the life of Jesus as revealed in both the New Testament and Gnostic gospels. My goal with these two chapters will be to provide an interpretation that reveals the joy and power of eroticism, sexuality, sexual love, and sexual pleasure – in and of themselves – as gifts from God that are meant to be enjoyed and that can contribute to our ability to create love and live in deep connection with our world.

Throughout my work on this project, a central question for me has been, "for whom am I writing this thesis?" Perhaps because of my own background with fundamentalist Christianity, my first answer to this question during my writing has most often been "for those like me who have been deeply hurt by conservative Christian interpretations of scripture and teachings about God that have been so negative about sexuality." I do not believe, however, that one has to have been raised in such a conservative tradition as I was to suffer the same wounding on some level. Many of us in Western culture have been hurt by these teachings that permeate our society, whether we consider ourselves to be religious or not. Hence, my greatest desire has been to write this thesis for anyone, regardless of religious orientation, who finds themselves drawn to the Divine, to being in love with that Being or Spirit, and to being in love with sex and sexual pleasure as well. I believe that there is such potential for the repair of our world in the healing power that we can generate when we live in this kind of unified sexual and spiritual love. The evidence of this power in my congregation and that I have

experienced in my own life gives me great hope that it can bring wholeness to others as well. It is my prayer that whatever I have to offer here may touch others with the healing that I have been blessed to discover and witness in my life, and in the ministry and journey I share with the people of MCC.

Chapter 1
The Eros of Domination and Submission in the Context of SM

For almost as long as I can remember, I have been in love with God. From accepting Jesus Christ as my personal savior when I was eight years old to my life today as the pastor of a queer and sex-positive congregation, my life has been a constant and ever-changing dance with the Divine. This dance, however, has not been a graceful one, at least not in the traditional sense of the word. More often than not it has resembled a long and intense wrestling match throughout my life, as I have struggled to embrace and to integrate within my being my own sacred trinity: my love for God, my love for women, and my driving passion for bold, adventurous, daring sex. As Gabrielle Roth says, "We long to be moved, to connect with our souls. Surfers find that connection in the ocean. Skiers on the mountain. Monks in the chant..."[3] I find my deepest connection with my soul (and thus with God) in two places: in the pulpit, and in sex with women that includes the *eros* of domination and submission. I have found that within the *eros* – the spiritual and energetic power - that can be created during sex that incorporates Ds within the context of SM, there is great potential for those involved to experience deep healing and emotional/spiritual liberation. Through a positive exploration of this *eros* of Ds, I will paint a picture of how its characteristics, parameters, and lived experience can contribute to a spiritual and theological understanding of its healing and liberating power.

I am compelled to embark on this exploration for myself, but also for my sisters and brothers of many faith traditions and specifically for those in my church who engage

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[3] Gabrielle Roth, "The Great Divide," *Sweat Your Prayers: The Five Rhythms of the Soul* (New York: Jeremy Tarcher/Putnam Inc., 1998), 6.

in Ds sexual play as well. If it is true, as Roth suggests, that sexuality was thoroughly demonized by western religion when "thousands of years ago, some men got together and, in the name of God, separated all matters having to do with the spirit from the flesh,"[4] how much more so may it be true that sex involving SM and Ds has been even more misunderstood and demonized by religious institutions and leaders? As Daniel C. Maguire (who I quoted in the introduction to this thesis) might ask, what would Augustine, Ambrose, Aquinas, and William of Auxerre, with their abject fear of sexual pleasure, think about BDSM and those who engage in it? I am honored to know many people of faith, both within my church and without, who courageously refuse to accept or perpetuate this demonization, and who celebrate and trust in their lived SM and Ds experience as both a gift and spiritual blessing in their lives. With rare exception I have found these individuals to be dedicated to living out the kind of love, justice, and mutuality I believe God longs for in our world. It is for this reason that I also believe that their lives deserve to be viewed with respect, and that one of my responsibilities as a minister of the gospel is to work to dispel the myths and misunderstandings that too often label these people as "perverts" rather than as the kind and compassionate human beings I know them to be. In his essay addressing same-sex violence within the gay community, Marvin Ellison says, "In my judgment, faithful, liberating action depends on acquiring moral vision in two senses: first, on our gaining proper perspective about the matter at hand, and second, on our being grasped by a compelling moral vision of nonviolent,

[4] Ibid., 3.

mutual relations that can truly enhance our common humanity."[5] Just as I believe it is the responsibility of those who represent the Christian Church (pastors, lay leaders, seminary professors, and denominational structures) to gain proper perspective on the sacredness of human sexuality, so also it is the responsibility of those same people within the Church to gain proper perspective on both sexual practices such as Ds and the people in our congregations who engage in such practices. While Ellison specifically addresses domestic violence in same-sex partnerships, as the pastor of a largely queer congregation I have also witnessed the emotional and spiritual violence and discrimination carried out within the LGBT community and within LGBT churches against those who are open about their sexual proclivities toward SM and Ds. As the leader of a church that is dedicated to creating the non-violent and mutual relations of which Ellison speaks, I am calling on my congregation and Christian congregations everywhere to realize that there are practitioners of Ds in our midst who have much to teach us all about sharing a compelling moral vision of many different types of sexual practice that truly can enhance and celebrate our common humanity.

The method I will use to carry out this positive exploration of the *eros* of Ds will first begin with my own understanding of *eros*. This understanding will then lead to a descriptive analysis of the characteristics, parameters and complexities of SM and Ds sexual play, followed by an exploration of the *eros* and healing power of Ds in the light of my own lived experience and the spiritual and theological reflections of authors I will

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[5] Marvin M. Ellison, "Setting the Captives Free: Same-Sex Domestic Violence and the Justice-Loving Church," *Body and Soul: Rethinking Sexuality as Justice Love* (Eugene, OR: WIPF & Stock, 2008), 285.

critically appropriate for my use in this chapter. This exploration may seem to the reader to be an ironic one. In commenting upon these authors' reflections, I know that in many cases I may be referencing the very words written by others to speak out against violence, abuse and oppression, and that at least some of these authors might possibly consider SM and Ds to be examples of the very violence, abuse, and oppression they are writing against. While I will do my best to honor the opinion and intent of each author within the context of their topic, I also believe it is important to use this irony as a tool to break through the very misconceptions that affix the labels of "violence" and "abuse" to sexual practices that include the power dynamics of domination and submission. It is also important to note that while I hope to paint a vivid and accurate picture of the basic nature and characteristics of Ds, this chapter will not be an in-depth analysis of every type of Ds or SM activity, nor will it be an exhaustive ethical or moral analysis of either.

In present-day culture in the North American context of my life, both *eros* and the erotic are almost universally connected to or equated with sex. But as David Carr points out, "the word *erotic* originates in Greek culture, where it included all sorts of core desires; certainly the sexual, but also intellectual, artistic, and spiritual yearnings."[6] The central term here is *core desire*, those passions and hungers that live in the deepest part of who we are, longing to be met and realized. Tragically, however, I see too often in my own congregation how so many are forced by societal structures to live in an extreme state of erotic deprivation; I believe that this deprivation is no accident. People who are numb to their passion and power, who are unaware that these forces exist within them,

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[6] David M. Carr, "The Bible and Eros," *The Erotic Word: Sexuality, Spirituality, and the Bible* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 9.

and who are given no encouragement to explore their own *eros* are easier to control by those who hold oppressive power over them. The purpose of the kind of power of which I speak here is expressly to *deprive* others of the knowledge and experience of their *eros*; it is a kind of domination that cares nothing for the humanity or passions of those being oppressed. This state of erotic deprivation perpetuated by oppressive systems of control and domination is truly tragic, because it also robs us all of the power of the erotic to help us connect with one another across all that divides us. I share Audre Lorde's belief that "The sharing of joy...forms a bridge between the sharers which can be the basis for understanding much of what is not shared between them, and lessens the threat of their difference."[7] Queer people and all those who are forced to live in states of *eros* deprivation need this sharing of joy in the experience of our passion, power, and connective ability. When we have the freedom to celebrate the erotic that is borne from the union of sexuality and spirituality in our own and one another's lives, we are empowered to both experience life as deeply as possible and understand how we can support and empower each other to live from the deepest places within ourselves as well.

Throughout my constant dance/wrestling match with God, I have often posed questions to myself also asked by bell hooks: "What forms of passion might make us whole? To what passions may we surrender with the assurance that we will expand rather than diminish the promise of our lives?"[8] Giving myself the permission to ask such questions was no easy task, given that my own sexual longings as a lesbian and as

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[7] Audre Lorde, "Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power," in *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches by Audre Lorde* (Freedom, CA: The Crossing Press, 1984), 56.
[8] bell hooks, "Moved by Passion: Eros and Responsibility," *Sisters of the Yam* (Cambridge, MA: South End Press, 2005), 95.

someone interested in SM and Ds were intensely taboo subjects in every area of my life. In her writing on the sexuality of Jesus, Kwok Pui-lan describes the early use of the word "taboo" by Westerners who appropriated the word from Polynesian culture in the 18th century. She states that "the word 'taboo'...provided a vocabulary or a force field to talk about the risk, boundary, terror, and dread of the 'sacred' as well as longing, desire, fascination, and possible transgression."[9] I believe that it was precisely the taboo nature of my desires, with all the attached transgressive risks, boundaries, terrors, longings, and fascination that propelled me forward against all religious and spiritual odds. A number of years after coming out as a lesbian, I also could not ignore my as-yet faint intuition that my SM desires might just be sacred. I came to realize that I could not deny how alive and connected to my spiritual self that I felt in SM play, nor the feelings of wholeness and peace that permeated my being afterwards. Contrary to everything I was ever taught about sex and my own sexuality in the independent Bible Baptist (fundamentalist) church in which I was raised, these experiences enabled me to trust that one of the most significant forms of passion most healing for me was to be found in the *eros* of SM and Ds. This trust did not happen overnight, and by necessity it began when I first discovered and received accurate information and education about what SM and Ds really are.

Sexuality author and educator Pat Califia (who now identifies as Patrick) describes SM as "an umbrella term...for any mutually pleasurable sexual activity between consenting adults that involves dominant and submissive role-playing, physical

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[9] Kwok, Pui-Lan, "Untouchable Taboo: On the Sexuality of Jesus, *Feminist Companion on Jesus Movement* ed. Amy-Jill Levine (forthcoming).

restraint, or erotic (i.e., pleasurable) pain."[10] SM is the term universally used by its practitioners rather than the word *sadomasochism*, which is often used in judgmental ways by those outside of SM communities to pathologize those who practice it. Just as SM is an umbrella term encompassing many kinds of sexual activity, so too is Ds used to label many different methods of role-playing and power exchange between two or more people within the context of SM as described above.

To gain an accurate understanding of the true nature of SM and Ds, it is imperative to realize the importance of three characteristics in Califia's description: mutual, consenting, and pleasurable. SM and Ds are **mutual** in that all the parties are equally passionate about and desiring of the kinds of activities that will be shared. Mutuality is determined before the activity begins through communication and negotiation between all who will be involved; participants are usually described by the function of their role with the words "top" (the person in the dominant role), and "bottom" (the person in the submissive role). This communication and negotiation requires that each top and bottom share the details, as specifically as possible, about the types of activities they enjoy the most, those that they do not enjoy and/or that are strictly off-limits, as well as the types of activity that they may be curious about or intrigued by but have not yet experienced. Through this method of negotiation, the stage is set for the "scene," generally a time-limited sexual experience that will take place within the parameters set by the communication shared beforehand.

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[10]Pat Califia, *"Sensuous Magic: A Guide for Adventurous Couples,"* (New York, NY: Masquerade Books, 1993), 6.

Aside from being a very provocative and stimulating way to begin preparation for experiencing SM and Ds together, this time of communication also ensures that each person is fully **consenting** to what will take place. Above all else, consent is the one characteristic that defines SM and Ds and sets both apart from abusive, violent, or oppressive behavior. Not surprisingly, this characteristic is also usually the most difficult to comprehend for those who do not practice SM and/or Ds, or who do not approve of the actions of those who do. Liz Highleyman describes the challenge of understanding consent within SM and Ds in this way:

> The words "top" and "bottom" do not transparently describe a consensual SM interaction. It is the bottom's consent that allows the scene to go forward (even in a scene in which the bottom temporarily agrees to forego consent). The bottom controls the foundation upon which the interaction is built, while the top often controls the specific details and direction of the scene. The top's pleasure depends on the bottom's willingness to engage in the interaction. The failure to grasp this paradox underlies many of the moral arguments against erotic domination and submission.[11]

It is this kind of trust and consent that lays the foundation for the exchange of power that occurs during SM and Ds activity, and that enables participants to safely explore their spiritual, sexual, and emotional landscapes and depths within. It is especially important that trust is present between those who are engaging in play, and that all parties involved believe that each person will hold the utmost respect for what has been consented to, and what hasn't. One of the elements of this trust in SM play is known as a "safe word," which is something that is available to both tops and bottoms. Many people enjoy "protesting" during a scene, and the words "no, no, no" might actually mean "yes, yes,

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[11]Liz Highleyman, "Playing with Paradox: the Ethics of Erotic Dominance and Submission," *Bitch Goddess: The Spiritual Path of the Dominant Woman* ed. Pat Califia and Drew Campbell (San Francisco, CA: Greenery Press, 1997), 155.

yes!" For this reason those who are playing together mutually agree upon a neutral word (perhaps "red" or "desk") that can be used to communicate that something has gone amiss in the scene and play needs to be suspended in order to correct the course of action. A sincere level of trust between top and bottom is essential; this enables each person to play secure in the knowledge that if a safe is used, all activity will stop to allow for the listening and communication necessary in the moment.

Finally, SM and Ds are nothing if not **pleasurable** for all those engaged in a scene together. In order for SM and Ds to be their best, both the top and the bottom must be dedicated to their partner's pleasure and fulfillment, as well as to having fun together. It is no coincidence that practitioners of SM and Ds often refer to what they do and how they do it as "play." Children engaged in play often enjoy using their imaginations, and just as often they have fun taking on the personas they would like to be in the moment. So, too, does the adult version of play within SM and Ds give the participants the opportunity to use their grown-up imaginations and have a very good time acting out the roles that are unavailable to them in day-to-day life, while simultaneously enjoying the pleasurable physical and sexual sensations that go along with this kind of imaginative play.

While Audre Lorde was never a supporter of SM or Ds during her lifetime, I can't help but think about both when considering her words: "There are many kinds of power, used and unused, acknowledged or otherwise."[12] The power that flows in an SM scene that incorporates Ds according to the characteristics and parameters I have described

[12] Lorde, "The Erotic as Power," 53.

above is one kind of power, deliberately used and intentionally acknowledged by those involved. However, as with most things in life that require self-awareness and that promote intense emotional and physical experiences, SM and Ds are complex and not easily contained within a box of rules and regulations. Playing with power, even according to the standard rules of "mutual, consenting, and pleasurable," can be controversial even within SM communities when that play is patterned after real world systems of oppression. Examples of such play would include scenes incorporating the use of Nazi imagery and themes, the domination of a person of color by a white person using racist slurs or overtones, or a scene involving "forced" sex between a male in the role of top with a female bottom.[13] Of course, the difference between these "play" scenes and real life is that there is no fixed, impenetrable system of domination; the top and bottom may have negotiated their desire to change roles mid-scene, with the bottom becoming the top and the top now submitting to the one she/he had previously been dominating. Such scenes can provide incredibly liberating and cathartic experiences, especially for those who live with real world oppression every day. An SM scene of this type can provide a safe and supportive container where all kinds of feelings can be revealed, seen, acknowledged and released. These are feelings that are sometimes labeled as "unacceptable" or "dangerous" and often have no available place to be expressed. These powerful emotions may build up in the bodies and spirits of those who struggle to live under oppression every day: anger, rage, grief, fear, sadness, shame and revenge can all be played out between the top and bottom in this kind of SM activity that is sometimes

[13]Highleyman, "Playing with Paradox," 161.

referred to as "edge play." There is no denying that to play with this kind of power is to dance precariously along moral and psychological lines that require tremendous care by all those involved, but the giving and receiving of such care is one of the most powerful alchemical elements of SM. Healing on profound levels can occur when people are so vulnerable with one another that they reveal the deepest parts of themselves that have been labeled as shameful, sinful, perverted, or damaged. When a bottom or top reveals feelings and desires that have been repeatedly rejected or demonized, and when those feelings and desires are met with acceptance, understanding and encouragement within the boundaries of a scene, shame can be transformed into pride, fear into self-acceptance, rage and anger into peace, and self-rejection into self-loving and wholeness.

It is the complexity inherent within SM and Ds, and the requirements of safety and great care demanded by such complexity that also promote the emphasis upon ethical behavior in SM communities. Such emphasis requires consistent self and community examination and soul-searching. As Liz Highleyman states, "The most important feature in a community's ethics is...how its members treat one another. Are we honest, trustworthy, and accountable? Do we interact with consent and without coercion? Do we take responsibility for our actions? Do we recognize and respect the fact that others may have desires and needs that are different from our own?"[14] In any type of community the answers to these questions will always vary, since communities are made up of human, and thus imperfect, beings. In my own lived experience within the SM community of the San Francisco Bay Area, however, I have repeatedly discovered individuals profoundly

[14] Ibid, 171.

committed to a high standard of ethical behavior. I have had the privilege of playing with many people over the past 14 years of my involvement in SM, and to a person I have experienced each one as deeply committed to the safety and well-being of their play partners, as trustworthy, responsible, respectful of differences, highly sensitive to the needs of others, self-aware, and both genuinely interested in and respectful of my life, truths, and desires. From all that I have seen and experienced I know that it has been their involvement in SM and the ethical standards it requires, along with their own experiences of pleasure and healing that SM often gives, that have helped them to become the kind of people they are. My SM sisters and brothers know a great deal about the healing possibilities that live within our mutual play. We know that healing can come in many forms. We know that here is physical healing that brings relief and strength to our bodies. We know that there is emotional healing that enables us to both honor our many feelings and also to choose wisely how we express an live according to our emotions. We know there is sexual healing that creates acceptance of who we are and what we desire and the ability to get our desires met with integrity. We know there is spiritual healing that empowers us to feel connected to something bigger in the world around us and that nurtures our connection to ourselves, other beings, and the life force of love and creation all around us. Most of all we know that SM is one of the most significant forms of passion that makes us whole – that enables us to have and embody all of these different forms of healing in our lives. It has been my privilege to share and create with them these experiences of healing that give us wisdom, strength, and compassion in our daily lives that we take with us into the world.

In my own lived experience of Ds, I have found that its power that allows me to swim deeply in *eros* and bring healing to my body and spirit begins with its primary nature as play. As children we play to have fun, not knowing at the time that we are simultaneously learning about ourselves and the world around us while making progress through the developmental stages of our childhoods. We are also not consciously aware of how much our imagination and our toys make play possible. We take both and create vivid worlds where we can be anything or anyone we want to be, and often the ways in which we use our imaginations reveal much of what may be important to us as adults. Even today at the age of 44, I remember "playing church" by myself in my room when I was under the age of 10, imagining myself to be leading a group of people who were seeking refuge from some unnamed danger. In my room, alone, far from the fundamentalist church of my childhood that proclaimed through its non-consensual theology of domination that females were not allowed to do such things, I was already living into my truest self, even if I didn't know it at the time.

On adult, psychological, sexual, and conscious levels, my play partners and I have often found that the nature of play within Ds provides us with very similar benefits to those we received from our childhood experiences of play. To begin with, engaging in Ds with others is fun, and it often adds a degree of joy and pleasure in our interactions and relationship with one another that can rarely be achieved in any other way. Taken alone, this is reason enough to engage in Ds; however, it has also given us tremendous opportunities to learn about ourselves and one another while growing in other areas of our lives. Ds has required me to both examine extensively and communicate directly

about my sexual desires and fantasies; because of this necessity I don't think there has been anything in my life that has taught me more about my psyche, my needs, and my *eros* as much as Ds. Simultaneously, as I have supported my play partners in their own Ds explorations as well, it has also given me a keen appreciation and admiration for the sexual and spiritual depth that lives within us all. It has taught me how to navigate the ebb and flow of my own erotic power, not just within the time and space limitations of a scene, but out in the real world where I constantly seek to let *eros* – my connection with God – move without interruption. It puts me in the very center, along with my play partners, of exactly what I believe Janet Walton refers to in her writing about worship and liturgy as "holy play." In quoting Diane Ackerman, Walton says that "we play because 'play carries one across fear and uncertainty toward the slippery edges of possibility, where one must use oneself fully and stretch human limits to achieve the remarkable.' Play is a vehicle for discovery and growth."[15] When Ds play within a scene enables me to have a direct and intense experience of my own *eros*, it is then so much easier to push past my fears and uncertainties to that place of discovery and growth where I am able to both pursue and be aware of that same *eros* in my day-to-day life.

Not coincidentally, the two primary components of childhood play, imagination and toys, are also two of the primary components of the holy sexual play of Ds that enable this adult discovery and growth. Imagination is key, enabling participants to be "omnipotent" or "helpless" and everything in between should they want to be. Toys (or

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[15]Diane Ackerman, *Deep Play* (New York: Random House, 1999), 38; quoted in Janet A. Walton, "Imagination and Improvisation: Holy Play," *The Papers of the Henry Luce III Fellows in Theology*, vol. 4, ed. Mathew Zyniewicz (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 2000), 179.

tools as they are sometimes called) are extensions of their imagined personas, whether those toys be the rope that temporarily secures a "captive" or the cane of the "stern headmistress." It is all of these ingredients taken together – imagination, toys, self-discovery, understanding of others, and fun that make Ds play the unique and magical experience that it can be. They are also some of the very ingredients that can make a Ds scene an intensely spiritual experience of healing within our bodies, hearts, and minds. This healing occurs as we give ourselves over to the communication, vulnerability, trust, self-exploration, and mutuality that are required of us, and in doing so we discover and have the opportunity to accept aspects of ourselves that are a part of our deepest and truest self. In other words, Ds give us the chance to discover, explore, and share our very soul.

Gabrielle Roth has this to say about the soul:

> The soul can only be present when the body and spirit are one; it cannot breathe, exist, or move disconnected from the body. Your parents gave birth to your body...The birth of your soul is a virgin birth, one you must do on your own...If you want to give birth to your true self, you are going to have to dig deep down into that body of yours and let your soul howl.[16]

As Roth also says in this same passage, giving birth is not easy, and labor is hard work.[17] While it is true that Ds can be the kind of play described above, it is just as true that Ds can serve as both the experience of labor and the midwife in the process of giving birth to one's own soul. This act of giving birth, of digging deeply into our bodies in order to let our souls howl, is not a timid act. Roth found that she was able to let her soul howl

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[16]Roth, "The Great Divide," 4.
[17]Ibid.

through sweating and dancing intensely all the way to her liberation and healing.[18] Engaging in Ds is also not a timid act; participation in a scene in a healthy and safe way may very well require a great deal of digging deeply into one's fears, secrets, shame, arousal, fantasies, desires, hopes, insecurities, inhibitions, strengths, needs, pasts, and present. I know of no other experience other than my own that has taught me this truth so well. When I first began to explore SM and Ds I was 29 years old. Throughout my entire life, since the time I was old enough to have sexual awareness of myself, my fantasies told the truth about who I was: a woman attracted to other women, and a woman drawn to both SM and Ds. It wasn't until I was 24 that I had my first sexual experience of any kind at all (it also happened to be my first sexual encounter with a woman), and it wasn't until I was 30 before I discovered the difference between just fantasizing about SM and Ds, and actually taking part in both. Getting to the place and time of that first scene was not easy. It had taken breaking through years of shame and fear to finally confess my interests to someone, followed by months of reading, talking with others, and trying to work up the courage to attend a women's SM group in San Francisco. This was followed by even more months of trying to bring myself to the place where I was actually ready to negotiate a scene and play with someone else. Certainly, though, it was in that negotiation and play that I discovered that I had indeed been in the process of giving birth to my truest self, and I learned what it felt like to have that self seen, acknowledged, accepted, and affirmed. It felt as though my soul truly did howl with release and profound relief at not having to keep so much hidden and bottled up inside anymore.

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[18]Ibid, 6.

In that particular scene, with its combination of my submission to the power of another and the intense physical sensations that were played out on my body, my soul's howl was full of joy and delight. Now, many years and many scenes since, there have been other kinds of howls as well, sometimes full of sadness or grief, rage or tears, or sometimes just full of the catharsis needed in the moment. Each one, though, has been a reclaiming and embracing of my soul, of realizing there is no part of me that should ever be forced into a prison of shame or fear by anyone's theology, interpretation of the Bible, or faith tradition. It is because of my journey with SM and Ds that I can understand what Roth is saying when she describes her own journey as a teacher guiding others to reclaim their power through dance: "The soul wasn't lost; it had been buried deep in our bones, driven down under by centuries of traditions designed to control our natural urges towards ecstasy. We had become alienated from ourselves as sacred beings."[19] In large part because of my dance with SM and Ds, I have been able to realize that I am a sacred being; that far from being the damaged and perverted abomination my church said I was, I am instead a sexual and spiritual part of creation that reflects the compassion, love, beauty, grace, passion, and power of all that is sacred, whole, and divine in our world.

I believe strongly that this ability to empower people to understand and embrace all of who they are is perhaps the greatest gift of Ds. The *eros*, characteristics, and parameters of Ds reflect the value of the incredible power of sexual desire in all its

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[19]Gabrielle Roth, "God, Sex & My Body," *Sweat Your Prayers: The Five Rhythms of the Soul* (New York: Jeremy Tarcher/Putnam, Inc., 1998), xxiii.

forms.[20] Although her article on the regulation of sex does not specifically mention Ds, Rebecca Alpert's description of sexual power and desire certainly seems to at least make room for its existence: "Sexual desire is irrational and unpredictable. We do not know what creates and stimulates desire within an individual. Love may be gentle and kind, but passion isn't always, nor is it always wise to express or act on it. Recognizing the dangerous dimension of sexual desire can enable people to find creative ways to work with it."[21] The structure and nature of Ds clearly recognize the dangerous dimensions of both human sexual need and desire. As human beings we are not always loving and kind; in fact, we often seem to be at the mercy of passionate emotions that have few, if any, morally acceptable or legal outlets. Whether we are attracted to Ds play or not, who among us has not had the sincere desire to inflict pain on someone because it might make us feel better? Who has never had the desire to be utterly free from responsibility for even a short period of time, longing for someone else to make all the decisions and call all the shots? How many times do our fantasies (that more often than not we never share with another living soul), reflect our needs and desires that are simply deemed unacceptable in our society? Ds recognizes these emotional and psychological realities of the human condition, and provides a safe and creative container in which to experience and explore all of who we are. As someone who lived half of my life trying to suppress everything about my sexuality that my church and society told me was forbidden, I can attest to the tremendous and damaging power of suppression. The more I was forced to deny my

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[20]Rebecca T. Alpert, "Guilty Pleasures: When Sex is Good Because It's Bad," *Good Sex: Feminist Perspectives From the World's Religions*, ed. Patricia Beattie Jung, Mary E. Hunt, Radhika Balakrishnan (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2001), 39.
[21]Ibid.

desires, the bigger they became as I got older, and the more alienated I was from myself and God. In Mark 12, when asked about the details of the most important commandment, Jesus replies: "The most important one is this: 'Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one. Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.' The second is this: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' There is no commandment greater than these." (Mark 12:29-31) Ds helped me to realize that loving God with my whole being, and loving my neighbor as myself, were both virtually impossible as long as I continued to deny so much of who I was and what I desired. How is it possible to love God with all of your heart, soul, mind and strength when your society and faith community demonize the sexual thoughts and feelings that are alive and kicking inside your heart, soul, and mind with such strength? How is it possible to love your neighbor as yourself when you are told repeatedly by those in power that so much of who you are is unlovable? How much more powerful than the non-consensual, enforced denial of our desires is the relief and acceptance we can feel for ourselves and others when we finally have permission and support to reveal all of who we are without judgment or condemnation, even if only within the time and role-restricted environment of an SM scene? Ironically, it has been the practice of Ds that has taught me more about the unconditional love of God than anything that I experienced in the church in which I was raised. When the parts of myself that my early experience of Christianity taught me to despise have been desired and celebrated by my top or bottom, the Divine revealed to me in human flesh, I have at long last finally experienced God as loving, accepting, and worthy of my devotion.

Of course, in the end, it is not only the characteristics and parameters of Ds that can lead us to a new and liberated love for God, ourselves, and others; it is the act of experiencing Ds in the company of our play partners that ultimately brings us the gift of healing and wholeness. bell hooks speaks of the healing black women who are physical/sexual abuse survivors can find when they are supported by partners who accept all of who they are: "Since so many black women have experienced traumatic physical abuse, we come to sexuality wounded. Irrespective of our sexual preference, we need to be with partners who are able to hear us define boundaries and limits. We need partners who are able to give us the loving care that makes sexual healing possible."[22] The physical and sexual wounds that live inside our bodies, inflicted both by abuse and by religious regulation of sex, require being seen and tended to with the loving support of others. I don't believe that practitioners of Ds are inherently more loving than other human beings; however, I do know that the act of sharing needs and wounds born of shame and oppression make the love received feel all the more redeeming and transformative. When we experience love through the nonjudgmental respect and care given by another in Ds play, especially in a scene where we are revealing the parts of ourselves that have been labeled as "sick" or "perverted," we experience the kind of profound acceptance and Divine affirmation that have the power to turn such damaging labels into the new names of "whole" and "blessed." If this is not an experience of God's love, what else could it be called? As we often say at my church, "God has no hands but our hands, and no face but our face." I would add that God also has no other way to share

[22] hooks, "Moved by Passion," 94.

unconditional love with us but through the ways we share that love and acceptance with one another.

If the sexual liberation and spiritual healing made possible in individual lives were the only gifts of Ds, I believe it would still be a powerful force for transformation. In my experience, however, the *eros* of Ds has the power to go beyond that which can empower individuals toward growth and wholeness. I believe that there is also potential for Ds to subvert, in individual lives as well as in society as a whole, the non-consensual dominant paradigms that oppress those who are purposefully deprived of real world power.

Once again in her discussion about the control of human sexuality through religious regulation, Alpert describes a possible benefit of such regulation: "To set up a system that invites transgression teaches people that they can question the values of the societies in which they live, and the results may be dramatic in bringing about the possibility of social change."[23] Alpert is speaking here of the regulation of sex by a dominant power in society – the power of institutionalized religion. Ironically, Ds can also be described as a system that invites its participants to transgress the acceptable mores of society, and provides opportunities for those involved to both question those values that are deemed acceptable and bring about social change through the lessons learned. The difference, of course, is that Ds communities are not institutions with acceptability or dominant power; thus, the Ds system that invites transgression itself transgresses the system put in place to make it forbidden. It is for good reason that

[23]Alpert, "Guilty Pleasures," 43.

devotees of Ds often refer to themselves as sex radicals and/or sexual outlaws. Ds pushes the outer limits of sexual transgression, which intensifies its power to both enable participants to experience radical change within themselves, and to visualize and take steps toward creating that kind of change in the world.

In discussing the differences between legitimate authority (that which is recognized by consent) and illegitimate authority (that which is forced upon someone), Highleyman states that (Ds) "play involves interpersonal power exchange, which is diametrically opposed to real world authoritarian roles."[24] Furthermore, it is the fluidity of the roles within Ds power exchange that provides the most potential for participants within a scene or Ds relationship to personally experience profound shifts in dominant paradigms of power. Within a Ds scene, the roles of "top" and "bottom" are not limited or determined by any personal characteristic of the players, including their race, expression of gender, economic background, age, or physical ability. A black woman can dominate a white male submissive, a top in a wheelchair can dominate a non-disabled bottom, a gay man can dominate a heterosexual man. Highleyman cites the thoughts of Susan Farr to describe this paradox:

> Perhaps this helps explain (why) our society tolerates non-consensual violence such as domestic violence and warfare, but issues strong taboos against the controlled exploration of power by consenting adults. She speculates that perhaps the powers-that-be 'wish to withhold experience with and knowledge of power from most people so that abuses of power by elites can be protected.'[25]

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[24]Highleyman, "Playing with Paradox,"160.

[25]Susan Farr, "The Art of Discipline: Creating Erotic Dramas of Play and Power," *Coming to Power*, ed. Samois (Boston: Alyson Publications, 1981,1987); quoted in Liz Highleyman, "Playing with Paradox: the Ethics of Erotic Dominance and Submission," *Bitch Goddess: The Spiritual Path of the Dominant Woman* ed. Pat Califia and Drew Campbell (San Francisco, CA: Greenery Press, 1997), 160.

Given all of this together, it is logical that individuals and institutions with power would seek to label both SM and Ds as dangerous. With its potential to transform its practitioners into human beings that are sexually and spiritually self-aware, steeped in the experience of their own power, and deeply connected to the *eros* that lives within the deepest part of who they are, why wouldn't Ds be feared by the powers-that-be as a powerfully subversive force that must be demonized and forbidden?

In my ministry as the senior pastor of MCC San Francisco, queer-identified, sex-positive congregation in what is perhaps the most sexually liberal city in the United States, I often ask myself questions that I am guessing most ministers do not consider in their day-to-day work. One of these questions is this one: how can I support the congregation that I serve in being a place that is both safe for and celebratory of the sex radicals in our midst – the sex workers, polyamorous couples and those with more than one partner, and practitioners of SM and Ds? Along with Thelma Burgonio-Watson, I also ask this question: "Is it not the church's calling to participate in re-creating the world as God intends it, by making it possible for all God's creation to live in peace, harmony, justice, and love?"[26] Burgonio-Watson asks this vitally important question on behalf of Asian American women and women immigrants who are survivors of domestic and racial violence born of misogyny and racism. I ask this question on behalf of those who are discriminated against, misunderstood, and labeled as "damaged" by the religious, political, and cultural institutions of power in Western society. Not only do I believe that

[26]Thelma B. Burgonio-Watson, "How Can We Sing Our Song, and Who Will Hear? Violence Against Asian American/Immigrant Women" *Body and Soul: Rethinking Sexuality as Justice Love* ed. Marvin M. Ellison and Sylvia Thorson-Smith (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2008), 273.

we, too, deserve to live in peace, harmony, justice, and love; for all the reasons I have elaborated upon here, I also believe that we do our fair share to create more peace, harmony, justice, and love in the world. Through the *eros* of SM and Ds and the emotional and spiritual healing that erotic power can bring about, we are reclaiming our bodies, our lives, and our souls; we are creating liberation for ourselves and our play partners, and empowering ourselves to be bearers of this liberation in the world.

Chapter 2
The Song of Songs:
A Biblical Celebration of Sexual Pleasure

What does it mean to be both a life-long Christian, and a life-long, sex-loving lesbian? What does it mean to be a woman who wears liturgical vestments in the church pulpit on one day of the week, and leather on any other day I have the chance? What does it mean that I find my deepest, most passionate connection with the Divine through sex, the very activity that has been both demonized and used to demonize me by The Church for centuries?

I wrestle with these questions every day, and the answers I have found have taken different shapes and forms over the years. From countless conversations I have had with my congregants in our queer-identified, sex-positive church, I know that they have discovered this to be true for themselves as well. Because of this shared understanding and discovery of the Divine through our spiritual and sexual pursuits, we have wrestled together deeply with questions about sex and spirit, loving our queer selves and loving God, and what we have been taught by religious institutions and society vs. what we know through our own hearts and bodies to be true. Our central question has been this: how do we who are seen and literally defined by what we do sexually with our bodies embrace our spirituality when sex has been so demonized and separated from God? We long to understand and share with others what it means for us to be people who love the Divine, who love sex, and who very much want to be able to love ourselves in spite of all the lies we have been told about who we are.

Not surprisingly, we also wrestle a great deal with conservative interpretations of both the Hebrew and Christian scriptures; these interpretations have been a tremendous source of reference and support for the conservative religious traditions that base those lies on what they believe much of what the Bible says regarding sexuality in general, and homosexuality in particular. Whether we grew up in conservative religious environments or not, most of us have lived in a Western culture saturated with religion-based homophobia and heterosexism. In his essay describing the tremendous legal power of the state to control our bodies, Patrick Califia describes the effect of this saturation in this way: "American culture is so heavily flavored by these [sex-negative, monotheistic] values that they are virtually inescapable...interpretations of the Bible are firmly ensconced in our legal code."[27] I also find resonance with David Carr's assessment that "...[the Bible] is too deeply embedded in many of us and in our culture. We ignore it at our peril. Just when we think we are free of it, old interpretations of the Bible come back and misguide us again."[28] In my congregation I have found that, particularly for those of us who do not identify as heterosexual, the sex-negative values of Christianity that pervade our culture are firmly ensconced in our bodies and psyches as well. Sexual desire and erotic longing are perhaps the strongest physiological and emotional forces within human beings. When a woman longs with every fiber in her being to touch another woman sexually, when a man feels overcome with erotic and emotional desire for another man, what happens when that longing and desire meet internalized messages within that

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[27] Patrick Califia, "What Comes Between You and Your Body?" *Speaking Sex to Power: The Politics of Queer Sex* (San Francisco, CA: Cleis Press, 2002), 202.
[28] David Carr, "The Bible and Eros," *The Erotic Word: Sexuality, Spirituality, and the Bible* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 12-13.

insist such feelings are evil in God's sight? Where do the feelings go, as well as the subsequent guilt that arises, when one follows through with such feelings? How does one deal with the emotional, psychological, and spiritual turmoil that occurs when there is a war going on within in which one side screams "this desire, this sex, this pleasure, this love are so very good" and the other, bigger, more culturally-sanctioned side is screaming back "God hates you for what you are feeling and especially *for what you are doing*, and you are going to be punished?" In my experience of my own life, and in my observations of the lives of the people I serve in my congregation, the answer to these questions is that often overwhelming feelings of guilt, shame, and self-hatred inevitably grow, oftentimes quite unconsciously. In our attempts to cope with these painful feelings (whether the feelings are conscious or not) we often turn to alcohol, drugs, food, nicotine, or other substances, as well as self-defeating behaviors such as isolating ourselves from others or from community. If we are fortunate enough to find support and healing through 12-step recovery programs, queer friendships, or LBGT-positive spiritual community such as MCCSF, we still have to cope with the daily reality that we are surrounded by religious communities, messages, and actions that continually bombard us with the lie that are sexual desires, longings, and practices are sinful.[29] As Califia and Carr would both remind us, time after time, it is sex-negative interpretations of the Bible that are used to provide justification for everything from political demonstrations to so-called "reparative

[29] *Christian Century:* "Religious Conservatives Ponder Resistance to Abortion, Gay Marriage." December 29, 2009.

therapy" to attempted legislation against same-gender loving people and other sexual "deviants."[30]

This reality points to the truth that, within Western society at large, it is often automatically assumed that "the Bible" is thoroughly anti-sex. Even within my own sex-positive congregation, it is a prevalent belief that the Bible condemns all forms of sexual practice outside of the very narrow confines of heterosexual consummation within marriage for the purpose of procreation. But is this really true? Are the Hebrew scriptures in their totality anti-sex, and is there anything at all in the New Testament that speaks favorably of sexuality and eroticism? Is there anything in the Bible that would offer support for the act of loving sex for the pure pleasure of sex, for loving ourselves as we revel in our experiences as both sexual and spiritual beings who find that we often discover God in our reveling, and for regarding sexual pleasure as a spiritual value in our lives? I ask these questions specifically for myself and for all those in my congregation, in the broader MCC denomination, and in the LGBT community who have ever felt wounded and condemned by religious belief and conservative biblical interpretation. While the biblical passages I will examine in this thesis may fall short of making the Hebrew scriptures and New Testament sex-positive in their totality, I believe that what they do have to offer is far too significant to simply be ignored, dismissed, or denied. Through exploring and reflecting upon *The Song of Songs* in this chapter and the life of Jesus in the next, I will demonstrate that enjoying sex and erotic pleasure and energy,

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[30] Jeffrey Gettleman, "After U.S. Evangelicals Visit, Uganda Considers Death for Gays," *The New York Times,* January 4, 2010.

loving the Divine and one's spirituality, and loving oneself simultaneously as a way of life is both spoken of and supported by these biblical passages.

It is important to note at this point that my interpretations of these scriptures are offered mainly with a focus on queer sexuality, such as same-gender sexual practices, polyamory, BDSM, and sexuality that generally falls outside what is considered to be normative heterosexuality. My intention with this focus is not at all meant to imply that heterosexual people do not need or cannot benefit as well from more sex-positive interpretations of scripture; however, I do believe there is a difference between how heterosexuality and queer sexuality are viewed by Western society through the lens of the Bible. A heterosexual couple will never have to cope with the taunt of hearing "God made Adam and Eve, not Adam and Steve" as those in my congregation must do every day, nor will they have to struggle as much to see themselves in *The Song of Songs* by virtue of the fact that the main characters are a woman and a man in love. While there is precious little in our society to equip anyone of any sexual orientation to find support for sex-positivity in the Bible, it is particularly absent for those of us who are automatically assumed to be condemned by the Bible for what we do sexually. It is for this reason that my interpretations of scripture in this chapter and the next are offered specifically in support of queer sexuality.

I begin this biblical exploration with *The Song of Songs* (which I will refer to as *The Song)* because I believe that there is no other biblical book that so thoroughly invites us to consider the Bible in a more sex-positive light. I can't help but think of *The Song* when I reflect on these words by Althaus-Reid: "Is theology the art of putting your hands

under the skirts of God?...can we then redefine theology as, for instance, a reflection on God closely related to loving arts of intimacy with the Beloved?"[31] To re-interpret the Bible may not specifically be a theological act; however, I think of this quote specifically because Althaus-Reid seeks to redefine theology as reflecting upon God in such a way that includes loving arts of intimacy. Especially for those of us whose relationships with God have been so damaged by sex-negative biblical interpretations, to consider the beautiful portraits of the loving arts of intimacy in *The Song* as a reflection upon what can be both divine in our lives and *the* Divine in our spiritual lives is to receive a receive an epiphany with tremendous healing power. To look at *The Song* as purely an erotic love poem is not only to touch God beneath Her skirts and reflect upon engaging in sexual arts of intimacy with the Beloved, it is also to lift the heavy, suffocating petticoats imposed upon the Divine by centuries of allegorical teachings about this book that have often kept its erotic delights invisible for too long.

Particularly within the belief system of evangelical Christianity that has so deeply hurt many of the people in my congregation, theology generally flows from biblical interpretation, and religious teachings that tell us how we are to live and relate to one another and God usually have their starting point in scripture. For this reason I believe it is critically important at the very beginning to be aware of the lens one is using to view *The Song*. Our understandings of the Divine, and the way we see and interpret scripture and use its wisdom in our lives are shaped by what we consider the scripture itself to be

[31]Marcella Althaus-Reid, "Queer I Stand: Lifting the Skirts of God," *The Sexual Theologian: Essays on Sex, God, and Politics* (New York: T and T Clark, 2004), 107.

in the first place. Particularly when it comes to *The Song*, whether or not the reader considers it to be an erotic love poem or instead applies an allegorical interpretation can lead to vastly different interpretations, and thus perhaps different experiences of meaning within one's spiritual beliefs and sexual practice. For example, someone who sees *The Song* as an erotic love poem will read the words "My beloved extended his hand through the opening, and my feelings were aroused for him" (5:4) very differently than someone who reads these same words, and yet believes *The Song* is an allegory about the marriage of the active and passive intellect as some regard it to be.[32] (I will say more about this allegorical interpretation, as well as others, later in this chapter.) If this same person has an experience of the Bible being used to demonize their sexual desires and practices, considering this passage to be a part of an erotic love poem that celebrates sexual pleasure outside of the narrow context of heterosexual marriage can provide an opportunity for both sexual and spiritual healing.

It is for this reason that I take issue with some of what David Carr has to say about *The Song*. While I have a great appreciation for much of what he shares about the Bible, sexuality, and spirituality, I disagree with his opinion that *The Song* needs to be interpreted both spiritually and sexually.[33] While I don't deny that a spiritual/religious interpretation of *The Song* can be beneficial, I believe that the sheer number of, and in some cases, absurd and oppressive attempts at such allegorical interpretations have all but destroyed an awareness or understanding of this beautiful piece as a celebration of sexual

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[32] Ariel and Chana Bloch, *The Song of Songs: A New Translation* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1995), 34.
[33] Carr, *The Erotic Word*, 11.

pleasure.[34] Time and time again when I read *The Song*, with what seems to me to be its obvious erotic (and in some cases almost pornographic) pictures fairly leaping off the pages (1:2-3, 12-17; 2:3-6; chapter 4; 5:1-5, 10-16; 6:2-3; 7:1-13; 8:10-14), I can't help but ask myself, "*Why?* Why have "most early interpreters understood *The Song* to be spiritual, *not* sexual?"[35] If I read 'Awake, O north wind, and come, wind of the south; make my garden breathe out fragrance, let its spices be wafted abroad. May my beloved come into his garden and eat its choice fruits!' (4:16) why would these early interpreters prefer that I say that these words are an allegory about the chaste love of the Virgin Mary, rather than a biblical, erotic reference to oral sex?

The Song is comprised of eight brief chapters about two people (the Shulamite woman and her beloved) engulfed in love and lust for one another. She declares of him in the opening words of the book, "May he kiss me with the kisses of his mouth! For your love is better than wine;" (1:2) and of her he says, "How beautiful you are, my darling, how beautiful you are! Your eyes are like doves!" (1:15) Yet biblical interpreters have repeatedly chosen to read this story in any other way they possibly can, often going to great distances to travel away from the celebration of sex found between the two lovers.[36] Some of these interpretations are fairly benign, such as that of Rabbi Akiba, who believed *The Song* to be the "holy of holies amidst the Writings."[37] As Carr describes, "depending on the context, Akiba and other rabbis identify the woman of *The Song* as the Jewish house of study, the Jewish court, a group of the righteous, or many other things. One

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[34] Bloch, *The Song of Songs*, 30-35.
[35] Carr, *The Erotic Word,* 141.
[36] Ibid., 127.
[37] Ibid., 4.

early rabbinic tradition even likens the bulges produced by the poles of the tent sanctuary in Exodus to the woman of *The Song's* breasts pushing against her garment."[38] However, even Rabbi Akiba rejected the notion that *The Song* should be appreciated for its sexual nature, for he believed that "the one who sings *The Song of Songs* like just one of the songs has no place in heaven."[39]

Rabbi Akiba's understanding of *The Song* highlights just one of its many allegorical interpretations; the actual number of such allegories is possibly too many to track or count. A very short list of a few of the allegorical interpretations applied to *The Song* through the ages include that of: the love of God for Israel; the relationship between Christ and the Church; the relationship of Christ to the believer's soul; the chaste love of the Virgin Mary; the marriage of Solomon and Pharaoh's daughter; a discourse of Solomon with Wisdom; the trials of the people of Israel; the marriage of the active and passive intellect as mentioned above; and the history of The Church, to name just a few.[40] In some cases these allegorical understandings may lend spiritual insights to those considering them; however, many times the insights taught through such allegories are permeated with racism.

In chapter 1, verse 5, the Shulamite woman says of herself, "I am black but beautiful." Consider this queer understanding by Christopher King of the oppressive teachings of many of the Christian allegorical interpretations of *The Song*:

> ...many Christian allegories associate the Shulamite's blackness with the disobedience of the Jews. In these readings, the Shulamite as 'black' denotes the

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[38] Ibid., 141.
[39] Ibid.
[40] Bloch, *The Song of Songs*, 29-35.

> Jews as an intractable, disobedient people. As 'beautiful,' predictably the Shulamite appears as the Church, particularly the Gentile Church, now redeemed from her particular waywardness. In this way, the phrase 'black but beautiful" comes to denote two communities: a straight, righteous community of insiders and a deviant, intractable cluster of outsiders. For these allegories, the move from 'black" to 'beautiful' involves a conversion, a renunciation of an aberrant past.[41]

As oppressive as this interpretation is, and as benign, absurd, suppressive, and/or damaging as others may be, it is possible that the abundance of allegorical interpretations provided protection in keeping the text safe by diluting its message and its ability to be threatening to anyone.[42] Ariel and Chana Bloch specifically point out the lost works of Sappho in their stipulation that rather than experience the same tragic fate of many ancient writings, the allegories about *The Song* may have ensured that the entire poem was kept intact down through the ages rather than having been preserved only as fragments that somehow escaped the notice of those who may have preferred it be destroyed altogether.[43]

Regardless of whether the allegorical meanings of *The Song* have validity for the lives of people of faith in the 21st century or whether they helped protect the book from destruction, one thing seems probable: they have served to distract readers and biblical students away from looking at *The Song* as an erotically explicit, profoundly sexual love poem.[44] Whether or not it has ever been the intention of biblical scholars to obfuscate the erotic meaning of *The Song* or perhaps to hide its existence altogether, at least within my congregation, these seem to be the effects of the historical propensity for allegorical

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[41] Christopher King, "Song of Songs," *The Queer Bible Commentary* ed. Deryn Guest, Robert E. Goss, Mona West, Thomas Bohache (London: SCM Press, 2006), 359.
[42] Bloch, *The Song of Songs,* 32.
[43] Ibid.
[44] Carr, *The Erotic Word*, 110.

interpretation. It never ceases to amaze me how truly shocked people are (even those who grew up in the Church) when I talk with them about the explicit erotic nature of *The Song*; invariably they tell me that they never even knew such a work was a part of the Bible. For too long the Church has enforced theological understandings upon it that have all but obliterated the sexual meaning of the words that drip with the passion of the Shulamite woman and her beloved. (Ironically, this same Church that has insisted upon an allegorical interpretation of *The Song* has been perfectly content to insist upon literal interpretation for much of the rest of the Bible!) It is for these reasons that I strongly believe we need a significant erotic emphasis and sexual interpretation told far and wide that can bring interpretive balance by exclusively highlighting, appreciating, and extolling the picture of sexual pleasure painted by *The Song.*

The Song contains beautiful passages that both describe and celebrate sexual pleasure and erotic love. Set within the city of Jerusalem and its surrounding countryside, *The Song* tells a passionate story of our two lovers as they enjoy without shame or guilt all the wondrous experiences they find in each other, their bodies, and the beauty of the natural world around them. From the very first verse cited above, to the very last: "Come away, my lover, and be like a gazelle or like a young stag on the spice-laden mountains," (8:14) literal and metaphorical invitations to sensual delights abound. Consider chapter 5, verse 1: "I have come into my garden, my sister, my bride, I have gathered my myrrh and my spices, I have eaten from the honeycomb, I have drunk the milk and the wine." This verse reveals both a passionate sexual connotation, as well as consummation, as the verb "to come into" usually "has a patently sexual meaning in

biblical Hebrew."[45] The environment of the garden is important both metaphorically and literally to the Shulamite and her beloved. They are repeatedly described like a guilt-free reincarnation of Eve and Adam in a new Eden as they enjoy together (in actual gardens and vineyards) a land flowing with wine, honey, and milk, and with an abundance of fragrant flowers, vines, figs, fruit, gazelles, and stags.[46] Their bodies and nature are one, as "the poet's metaphors keep shifting between the actual landscape, suffused with erotic associations, and the landscape of the body."[47] The centrality of vineyards and gardens to their story is further evidence of the erotic nature of their relationship, since (with the rare exception of the Garden of Gethsemane) "in the world of the Bible, gardens (and vineyards) are places where lovers meet to make love."[48]

Vineyards and gardens are not the only metaphors within *The Song*, however; highly suggestive euphemisms are found in verses like 5:5 – "I arose to open for my lover, and my hands dripped with myrrh, my fingers with flowing myrrh, on the handles of the lock." Could it be here that within *The Song* we not only have a vibrant picture of lovers consummating their passion together, but through self-pleasuring as well? Indeed, self-pleasuring may have been a necessity, since it seems that the Shulamite and her beloved are in such a fevered state of desire for one another that they can hardly contain themselves together or apart. As King describes their mutual longing for one another, he points to chapter 3: "The Shulamite, too, is tormented – but deliciously! – by a desire over which she has utterly no control: 'Upon my bed at night I sought him whom my soul

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[45] Ibid., 4.
[46] Ibid., 9.
[47] Ibid.
[48] Carr, *The Erotic Word*, 13.

loves…' The Shulamite's longing eros for her beloved brings an acute delirium…'"[49] This acute delirium is also evident in chapter 2, verse 5: "Let me lie among vine blossoms, in a bed of apricots! I am in the fever of love."

Perhaps if *The Song* contained only its delicious descriptions of sexual passions and lustful fevers it could have been appreciated as the erotic love poem that it is. I believe, however, that it is not what *The Song* contains as much as what it lacks that forced countless non-sexual interpretations upon it again and again. Nowhere in *The Song* is there any reference whatsoever to a relationship sanctified by matrimony between the Shulamite and her beloved. There is, however, evidence that they enjoyed all the erotic delights between them outside of marriage in the fact that they meet at night in the vineyards and countryside and depart from one another at sunrise. The anxiety of the Shulamite's brothers that their sister is giving herself to her beloved would also seem to indicate that the main characters are not even betrothed to one another. If *The Song* offered a different picture, one of the erotic joy experienced by two people who were *married*, then perhaps church patriarchs such as Origen would not have felt the need to interpret their love as a representation of that of Christ for the Church, or between each human soul and God.[50] Carr argues that Origen was actually attempting a very spiritually erotic interpretation of *The Song* by saying that Origen believed "that the hottest desire one can have is for God."[51] This may well be a point worth considering, but my argument is this: there is value in looking at the sexual activities and erotic pleasure shared between

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[49] King, *The Queer Bible Commentary*, 360.
[50] Carr, *The Erotic Word*, 141.
[51] Ibid., 142.

the Shulamite and her beloved as synonymous with "hot desire for God," as spirituality itself, and as an actual expression of love for the Divine. Even though the name of God is not mentioned even once literally in *The Song*,[52]do the lovers not celebrate what is sacred and joyous, powerful and passionate, sensuously spiritual and spiritually sexual in the beauty they see in each other, the delight they take in one another's bodies, and the abundant gifts of the natural world around them?

Given the obvious absence of written reference to YHWH, the lovers seem to lack any concerns about religious regulations or obligations. *The Song* would appear to be a thoroughly secular work made sacred by its canonized placement with the Writings of the Hebrew scriptures.[53] Perhaps if *The Song* were turned into a screenplay with a more traditional Christian interpretation, it would surely reveal an unhappy ending most fitting for those who both ignore and "disobey" the supposed will of God for human sexual relationships with such a wanton and vulgar display of sensual pleasure. Such an ending never comes for the lovers, however; instead, they assert their place and their pursuit of sexual pleasure in the world without fear and without punishment, referring repeatedly to all the places they claim as their own with words like "our bed," "our roof beams," "our rafters," "our wall," "our land," and "our doors."[54]

We have no way of knowing how long the two lovers engaged in their sexual relationship together; perhaps they eventually were betrothed to one another and were married, or perhaps their passionate affair lasted only for a season. What we do know is

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[52] Bloch, *The Song of Songs*, 27.
[53] Ibid., 27.
[54] Ibid, 8.

what the written evidence reveals about their experience of their own sexuality and the considerable embodied pleasures that they enjoyed with one another and in the natural world around them. It is precisely through the apparent lack of shame and the unmarried state of the lovers that I believe *The Song* grants sacred permission to us to embrace sex, sexual desire and sexual pleasure apart from religious or cultural impositions or regulations. The Shulamite and her beloved share erotic love that is not legitimized by marriage, and they engage in sexual activity that does not seek to fulfill the mandate in Genesis to "be fruitful and multiply." (9:7) Shame, fear, obligation, and/or guilt do not dwell with the Shulamite and her beloved in the gardens they enjoy; delight, pleasure, and delicious torment repeatedly relieved by sexual fulfillment do. If *The Song* existed by itself as a secular example of ancient Hebrew poetry it could be regarded simply as that; however, this particular book comes to us as a portion of the canonized Hebrew scriptures. This is especially significant for those of us whose lives and sexuality have been demonized by many types of conservative religious voices who use the Bible to legitimize their claims. In particular for same-gender loving people and for those whose sexual lives include activities such as SM, it is critically important to understand the many gifts offered by *The Song* that should be more widely known and taught in our churches. While it is true that the story of *The Song* revolves around a woman and man, is also a story that offers great support for the celebration of all forms of sexual love between people of all genders. As King highlights so clearly:

> The Song of Songs sustains a moral worldview in which...beauty alone is a sufficient motive for love, desire, and sexual union...all persons have the right to love as they will according to the dictates of reciprocal desire...an ethic of intimacy, rather than gender complementarity, ought to be central in human love

> relationships…the human person is essentially erotic in nature…love and sexual life are most perfectly expressed in love between fully equal partners and in fully mutual self-offering of body and soul.[55]

How might the ways we live our lives and fulfill our sexual desires in Western culture in the 21st century be different if more of us were familiar with a non-allegorical, sex-positive interpretation of *The Song*? If, as David Carr says, we ignore the Bible at our peril, what if we knew there was something in the Bible that we could embrace for our sexual benefit? What if people in synagogues and churches were as familiar with the way of life displayed by the Shulamite and her beloved as they are with the Ten Commandments? What if we believed that the Shulamite and her beloved call out to us from their place in the canon to revel in the pleasure gardens of our own desires free from the demonization of sex, the regulation of marriage, and the fear of God's wrath? For those of us who have been threatened with the fires of hell because of how and who we choose to love, what if we were more familiar with this story about lovers who were not punished for their bold and confident claiming of what they seem to believe is their natural birthright to enjoy one another in every way possible? Surely if we learned through sermons and Bible study how much the Shulamite and her beloved delighted sexually in one another without shame, without punishment, and even outdoors(!), the burdens of shame and guilt that so many of us carry about our sexual selves would be lessened. Perhaps if *The Song* 5:1 ("Drink and imbibe deeply, O lovers") were as well known and preached as John 3:16, more of us would feel free to enjoy sex and erotic pleasure with the same permission and abandon as the ancient lovers.

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[55] King, *The Queer Bible Commentary*, 369-370.

Particularly because the Shulamite and her beloved were not married and were not consummating their relationship for the purpose of procreation, I believe their actions and words offer a blessing that is perhaps especially redemptive to those of us of all sexual orientations who color outside the lines of normative sexuality in our culture today. Like the ancient lovers, same-gendered loving people engage in sexual activity together solely for these purposes: to enjoy sexual pleasure and embodied intimacy together. The same can be said for those who, regardless of the gender of their partner(s), engage in sexual practices that only serve purposes of pleasure and intimacy, such as those who include SM in their erotic lives. By the example they set, the Shulamite and her beloved demonstrate a way of life for those of all sexual orientations and proclivities that includes pursuing joy and celebrating the wonder of the world around us through sex (4:8-15), through self-pleasuring (5:5), through self-loving (1:5), through embodied sensuality (5:10-16), through physical intimacy (2:6), and through embracing the unique beauty that we see in those we choose to be our lovers (2:16).

Just as we have no way of knowing how long the Shulamite and her beloved were together, we also have little to help us understand how they experienced their relationship to YHWH or to their own spirituality. It could be easy to think that because the name of the Divine is not mentioned anywhere in *The Song,* that relationship between YHWH and the lovers is also not present. But I believe the Shulamite and her beloved may be asking us to consider that there are many ways to connect with the Divine beyond specifically speaking of YHWH, and that there are many paths that can lead us toward recognizing the presence of the sacred around us. For some that connection and presence are found in

the synagogue or the church or in prayer or meditation. Perhaps for the ancient lovers the joy they felt in the very act of making love in the gardens and vineyards of their own Eden was also spiritual ecstasy and veneration in a sanctuary of the natural world and their own making. As the Shulamite and her beloved took such tremendous delight in one another, perhaps their adulation of one another's bodies and their celebration of abundant love and pleasure were a different kind of reverence and expression of gratitude. Again, we can never know for sure, but for those of us who have been hurt by sex-negative interpretations of the Bible, we can allow these possibilities to open our hearts, minds, and bodies to considering the sacredness of our own sexual desires and actions. When making love with someone of the same gender, we can remember that *The Song* is a celebration of love between two people that thrived outside of the boundaries of societal approval. When we feel shame and/or fear because of our sexual desires, we can remember the lusty abandon with which the Shulamite and her beloved pursuit the fulfillment of their erotic needs. When we hear the echoes within of the religious voices in our society who say God's word condemns us and our sexuality, we can remember that *The Song* is in the Bible too.

Chapter 3
The Erotic Jesus

Did he, or didn't he? Was he or wasn't he? In much of the academic material about the sexuality of Jesus I read for my work on this thesis, there seemed to be a great deal of focus on these two questions. Did Jesus have sex with anyone, or didn't he? And if he did, did he have sex with those of the opposite gender, the same gender, or both? While I find these to be intriguing inquiries, I can't help but think that something is lost if I choose to limit my curiosity about the sexuality of Jesus to these questions. If the joy and power of eroticism are gifts from God – and perhaps if our experiences of both *are* our very experiences of the Divine – then focusing solely on the historical facts (or the lack thereof) or the mechanics of sex acts alone in anyone's life seems to me to be a tremendous limiting of my sexual and spiritual imagination. As Dale Martin says in his book, "Sex and the Single Savior:"

> ...we needn't think of Jesus as actually "having sex" (whatever *that* means these days) in order to see him as erotic and sexual. Any sexually experienced person knows that the most intense eroticism may be had by denying oneself consummation...May that explain the intensity in Jesus' passion? *If* we take him to be an ascetic after all...do we nonetheless see in him the erotic passion and desire of the sexually charged ascetic? But in that case *again*, Jesus is certainly not a normal man – not even a "normal" gay man. He ends up again looking very singular – very queer.[56]

The truth is that I don't know whether Jesus was a celibate ascetic, a sexually charged ascetic, or a fully sexually active human being. No one does, as I will elaborate

[56] Dale B. Martin, *Sex and the Single Savior: Gender and Sexuality in Biblical Interpretation* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2006), 100.

upon in this chapter. There simply is not enough historical evidence for anyone to know for sure one way or the other. There is, however, enough recorded about Jesus' life in both canonical and Gnostic gospels to reveal that erotic power and erotic connection with himself and others was very present in his life, unlike the sexless, celibate savior that Augustine considered him to be:

> Augustine defended this logic: since sexual desire pollutes sublime purity, and since Jesus was perfect, ergo he could not have had sexual desire. The lustless Savior rescues some who would otherwise receive their just damnation. Those few whom God elects should show their appreciation by attempting to imitate the lifestyle which Jesus allegedly had. Celibacy was advocated for all, and Augustine cheerfully accepted the prospect that human history would quickly end if everyone took his advice.[57]

I am deeply concerned with this picture of Jesus as utterly without sexual desire or agency. As the primary representative of Christianity, Jesus has been used as a sexless savior who by extension represents a faith tradition in which sex is demonized, and who has been used to condemn queer people and their shameless, sexual ways. I am most familiar with the discrimination experienced by the GLBT people within my congregation, and for many of us, the greatest source of this discrimination has been that perpetuated by those from conservative/fundamentalist Christian traditions. These are often the Christians who speak in the name of a Jesus who is both purely sexless and utterly condemnatory of homosexuality, even though Jesus said nothing about same-gender love. As Bernadette Brooten points out:

> We know of no saying attributed to Jesus, either within the New Testament or within any of the many ancient gospels not included in the canon, in which he comments on sexual love between men or between women. Such love was apparently not a major concern to him. In spite of this, the early church set itself

[57] William E. Phipps, *The Sexuality of Jesus* (Cleveland: The Pilgrim Press, 1996), 163.

> on a path that in the late twentieth century has resulted in opposition to lesbian, gay, and bisexual civil rights and ecclesial recognition as a hallmark of most forms of Christianity.[58]

As same-gender loving people we have been seen by members of this oppositional Church and identified solely by what we do sexually, without consideration of any other part of our persona or being. No doubt this tendency by the Church to over-identify same-gender loving people with sex is connected to the same tendency in society at large: "Nongay people often assume that gays are inordinately interested in sexual activity, that they spend a lot of time thinking about sex, and that their interests are often sex related."[59] In short, the people in my congregation are intimately acquainted with what it feels like in the world at large and in religious circles to be shamed, ridiculed, and emotionally (and sometimes physically) violated because of their sexuality, often by people who say they are acting in the name of the sexless Jesus. Time and time again as I see evidence each week of the ways the people in my church have been hurt by the sex-negative beliefs of conservative Christianity that permeate so many churches and our broader culture, I can't help but wonder: what if the concept of a more erotic/sex-positive Jesus was widely available or accepted? If part of the basis for the demonization of sex is supported by a belief in a sexless/celibate Jesus, might it not be possible for Christians to at least hold a more positive respect for human sexuality in all its forms if Jesus could be seen as both sexual or erotic *and* divine? And if there was a more favorable view of sexuality, sexual or sensual pleasure, and the erotic within Christianity, might this create

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[58] Bernadette J. Brooten, *Love Between Women* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1996), 194.
[59] Robert O. Hawkins, Jr. and A. Elfin Moses, *Counseling Lesbian Women and Gay Men* (Columbus: Merrill Publishing Company, 1986), 100.

more acceptance of those of us who are identified and viewed solely as sexual beings because of our sexual orientation and practices?

I ask these questions because as a lesbian who was raised in an extremely conservative Christian tradition, the importance of following the example of Jesus in all things was emphasized above everything else. In college I memorized the book of Philippians as part of a discipleship program, and these words of the apostle Paul live inside me to this day: "If therefore there is any encouragement in Christ…if any affection and compassion, make my joy complete by being of the same mind, maintaining the same love, united in spirit, intent on one purpose." (Philippians 2:1-2) This emphasis upon being as Christ-like as possible (no distinction was ever made between the person of Jesus and Jesus the Christ) was of paramount importance in the Christian churches in which many LGBT people were raised, particularly the individuals who have been most hurt by the teachings of The Church. We are the ones who stand to benefit the most by the possibility of an understanding of Jesus the Christ who is both divine *and* sexual.

Ultimately I also ask these questions because they are deeply important to so many in my congregation and in MCC churches around the world as well. We want a Jesus and an image of the Divine that includes sex and the erotic, so that we can bring all the parts of ourselves that have been so demonized into relationship with this Jesus, and so that all of who we are can be included in that Divine image. We need others, namely those who oppose us in the name of a Christian God, to hold an image of a sexual and/or erotic savior, and to begin to accept or understand our sexual experiences through a new belief that sexuality and eroticism are good and sacred. We ourselves need information to

help us replace the sexless Jesus that has dominated Christianity for centuries with an image of an erotic Jesus that can help us love and heal ourselves of the sexual shame that has been forced upon us.

Why should we question the image of Jesus as a person whose life was utterly devoid of the sexual or the erotic? I will reflect on this question within the context of specific definitions for "sexual" and "erotic." I will use the word "sexual" to refer to any act, possible evidence of an act, or expressed feeling that could display or indicate specifically physical sensuality and/or sexuality; I will not use the word "sexual" or "sexuality" to refer to orientation or a characteristic of being human unless specifically stated. The use of this same definition for "erotic" will also hold true; however, in addition I will use "erotic" to describe the powerful, energetic life-force within and between people that includes and also goes beyond sexual attraction, sensation, and/or activity. Within the context of this definition, "erotic" may mean sexual, and it can also include this particular kind of power as described by Audre Lorde:

> The erotic functions for me in several ways, and the first is in providing the power which comes from sharing deeply any pursuit with another person. The sharing of joy, whether physical, emotional, psychic, or intellectual, forms a bridge between the sharers which can be the basis for understanding much of what is not shared between them, and lessens the threat of their difference.[60]

Hence, according to this definition, the theological dialogue that Jesus has with the Samaritan woman at the well in John 4:7-26 (the longest theological discussion he has within anyone recorded in the canonical gospels) could be described as an erotic experience. The two of them banter back and forth about history ("You are not greater

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[60] Audre Lorde, "Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power," in *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches by Audre Lorde* (Freedom, CA: The Crossing Press, 1984), 56.

than our father Jacob, who gave us this well…," 4:12) and about abstract concepts ("If you knew the gift of God, and who it is who says to you, 'Give me a drink,' you would have asked Him, and He would have given you living water," 4:10). She is astonished at Jesus' deep intuition about her also ("Go call you husband, and come here," 4:16), and his surprisingly gender-neutral revelation about her current relationship ("the one whom you now have is not your husband," 4:18b) revealed by her reply ("Sir, I perceive that You are a prophet…," 4:19). There is no evidence of Jesus having a sexual encounter with the Samaritan woman, and yet the deep intellectual and psychic exchange they share paints a picture of an experience between the two of them that is full of erotic energy.

We will never know for sure just how many such erotic experiences Jesus may have had with both men and women during his lifetime, let alone whether or not he engaged in any sexual activity with himself or with others. What we do know, however, is that there is a great deal of ambiguity and mystery regarding the place of sex, celibacy, and/or marriage in Jesus' life. The first source of this mystery involves the culture of first-century Palestinian Judaism in which Jesus was raised, a culture known to reflect a number of different forms of asceticism.[61] The Dead Sea Scrolls describe an asceticism focused on purity and piety; the Essenes proscribed the use of anointing oil and engaged in daily cold-water baths and strict physical modesty; and the Nazarenes avoided the fruit of the vine, hair-cutting, and contact with the deceased, to name just a few.[62] Jesus and the followers of his movement did not fit neatly into any of the ascetic norms or practices of their day.

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[61] Martin, *Sex and the Single Savior*, 97.
[62] Ibid.

> Since it is so difficult to place Jesus' assumed asceticism in an ancient Jewish context, and the evidence *that* he was a sexual ascetic is so slim (mainly an argument from silence), maybe it is safe to assume that Jesus was *not* an ascetic after all...A celibate Jesus, if constructed according to our available evidence, does *not* fit his historical context well, yet we have no evidence that Jesus was anything *but* single...[63]

Scholars from Martin to John Boswell to the Jesus Seminar who have conflicting opinions regarding the celibacy issue nonetheless agree that at the least Jesus certainly had "significant others" in his life. Boswell states that "He was apparently celibate himself, and the only persons with whom the Gospels suggest he had any special relationship were men, especially Saint John, who carefully describes himself throughout his gospel as the disciple whom Jesus loved."[64] But Robert Goss cites the writing of biblical scholar Robert Funk about the opinion of the Jesus Seminar: "The Fellows of the Seminar were overwhelmingly of the opinion that Jesus did not advocate celibacy. A majority of the Fellows doubted, in fact, that Jesus himself was celibate. They regard it as probable that he had a special relationship with at least one woman, Mary Magdala."[65] The overarching reality of the culture and teachings of first-century Palestinian Judaism in Jesus' life makes this question about his marital status, as well as his relative silence on the subject of marriage and family, all the more confounding. According to Boswell, "...he certainly rejected the position of paramount importance accorded the family under Mosaic law and Judaic culture...When confronted with adulterers, he recommended no punishment and clearly suggested that the sins anyone else might have committed were

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[63] Ibid, 97-98.
[64] John Boswell, *Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1980), 115.
[65] Robert C. Goss, *Queering Christ: Beyond Jesus Acted Up* (Cleveland: The Pilgrim Press, 2002), 118.

of equal gravity."[66] At least in the canonical gospels, why did he not say more in a positive or inclusive way about marriage, sex, or procreation?

In historical Christianity there is a great deal of ambiguity with regard to Jesus and celibacy as well. As Martin points out, "In spite of a very few early Christian voices to the contrary…all the Fathers who come to be accepted as 'orthodox' are agreed that Jesus was celibate…(but) there is a noticeable reluctance among the Fathers to use Jesus as a *model* for celibate life."[67] Just why was it that the theological patriarchs of Christianity more often than not preferred to hold the example of Jesus up as a bridegroom more often than as a celibate man?[68] Why didn't Jesus and his teachings fit well enough into any one of the categories of asceticism and celibacy that were the norm in his day to merit the mention and teachings of the Church Fathers?

What these questions point to for me is this: ultimately there is enough mystery surrounding the life of Jesus in relation to sex that it seems presumptuous at best for anyone to state with certainty that we know anything definitively about something so profoundly significant. At his core and by his actions and words, Jesus was sexually ambiguous. How can we say we know anything for certain about who Jesus was or was not as a sexual person, whether we believe he was celibate or not?

Remaining focused solely on the impossibility of attempting to unravel this mystery leaves us mired in the "did he or didn't he?" debate. What if we adjust the lens, however, from a close-up focus to a broader perspective that allows us to look at

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[66] Boswell, *Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality,* 114-115.
[67] Martin, *Sex and the Single Savior*, 98.
[68] Ibid.

sexuality and eroticism in Jesus' life in the context of a bigger picture? If we keep in mind that bodily pleasure and sensuality can be experienced in many ways, and that erotic power is that life-force that flows between human beings engaged in passionate dialogue, work, and relationship within everyday life, what new picture of Jesus can we paint that might allow us to see him in a different, more sex- and erotic-positive light? Particularly for those of us raised to believe that imitating Christ should be our supreme priority in life, if we are successful in developing this new picture, how might our sexuality or our awareness of the erotic energy in our daily lives be transformed if we understood the pursuit of both to be imitating Christ? What if we could equate the erotic power Jesus may have felt walking among the throngs of people excited by his message and deeds with the joy and erotic excitement of marching in an annual LGBT pride parade? What if the sensuality of Jesus giving his body over to the woman who anointed his feet felt comparable to the ways we experience our bodies with one another in embraces we share, in massage, on the dance floor, and in bed?

I have long considered it to be highly ironic that Christianity has not generally been considered to be a religion that celebrates sensuality and physical touch given many of the experiences, modes of communication, and relationships in Jesus' life that are mentioned in the canonical gospels. The very fact that Jesus is considered by many to be the Divine made flesh is, to me, the highest expression of sacred sensuality that his life represents. Whether Jesus was made sex-free in the canonical gospels out of the need to appeal to those who espoused asceticism and celibacy in his time or not, too many snapshots of sensuous experiences and encounters with others in his life exist to

obliterate a bigger picture of a more-embodied, erotic Jesus altogether. Just a few of these snapshots include many of the ways that Jesus used and/or received physical touch that conveyed compassion and love, and that provided a physical, erotic energy that brought healing. Some of these include: Mary's anointing of Jesus' feet with costly perfume (John 12:3); Jesus allowing Thomas to touch him after the resurrection (John 20:27); Jesus taking the hand of the deceased daughter of the synagogue official to raise her from the dead (Matt. 9:25); Jesus touching the eyes of two blind men to heal them (Matt. 9:29) and his very earthy use of dirt and his own spit to make a healing mud for another blind man (John 9:6); Jesus taking children into his arms to bless them (Mark 10:16); Mary seated at Jesus' feet as she received his teachings (Luke 10:39); the beloved disciple reclining against Jesus' breast at the last supper (John 13:23); and in one final, incredibly beautiful, erotic act of love and wisdom, Jesus' disrobing before his disciples, kneeling before them, and washing their feet (John 13:4-5).

Complementing this picture of a Jesus who clearly had no fear of the bodies of others, or of using his own body to connect with others and share love with the people in his life, are the prevalent themes of eating, drinking, and feasting throughout his ministry that are recorded in the canonical gospels. Taken together these themes offer to us a picture of someone who lived anything but an austere and severely Spartan life. Although fasting was an important part of Jesus' spiritual practice (Matt. 4:2), from references to his dining habits we can gather that he was no culinary ascetic. He was reputed to sit at table with society's outcasts (Matt. 9:10); he spoke of his bad reputation as a glutton and a drunkard (Matt.11:19); and he suffered guilt by association with his disciples who did

not fast enough (Mark 2:18) and who broke Sabbath laws with regard to food on the Sabbath (Mark 2:23).

Far from the picture that much of Christian teaching and history has given us of a Jesus who was an ascetic in every sense of the word, what emerges from these passages is a representation of a Jesus who lived a more balanced life. Yes, there were times when he physically drew away from others, (Matt. 4:1, 8:18), and yet he frequently made the choice to intimately touch and relate to others with his physical body. Yes, there were times when he fasted and prayed, and yet he also embraced the acts of eating, drinking, and feasting as erotic experiences of the sharing of physical joy and love with others. Jesus was neither an ascetic nor a hedonist, and he was not a Jewish literalist reader of the Torah. All of this leads me to wonder why we might think that Jesus rejected all forms of sexuality outright. If his life as a spiritual teacher and leader required a balance of community and withdrawal, deprivation and abundance, might it not also have required a balance of sexual asceticism with sexual or erotic pleasure? If this was the case, what can Jesus' relationships with others reveal to us about the erotic and the sexual in his life?

To answer this question it is helpful to begin with reflection upon the relationships and modes of relating that Jesus had in his life with women. Too often feminist scholars within Christianity have described Jesus as a revolutionary by pointing to the radical, new ways he liberated women in his encounters with them. This description, however, often makes invisible what inclinations toward more liberative views of women already existed within the Judaism of Jesus' time. As Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza states:

> The issue is not whether or not Jesus overturned patriarchy but whether Judaism had elements of a critical feminist impulse that came to the fore in the vision and ministry of Jesus...The praxis and vision of Jesus and his movement is best understood as an inner-Jewish renewal movement that presented an *alternative* option to the dominant patriarchal structures rather than an oppositional formation rejecting the values and praxis of Judaism.[69]

Schüssler Fiorenza then goes on to point to the book of Judith, a fictional story that was not a part of the rabbinic canon of Jesus' time, but which nonetheless probably influenced his life and teachings.[70] The story of Judith is similar to the story of Exodus, in that it tells the account of the liberation of Israel from an oppressor, although by the hand of Judith, rather than by the hand of Moses.[71] Assuming that Jesus was steeped in the tradition of this story, he would have been familiar with the notion that Judith

> ...had inherited her husband's considerable estate and had managed it through a woman steward...she was free to reject remarriage...she had the authority to summon the elders of the town and to rebuke them...no mention is made that she was veiled when leaving her house...she remained unmarried...she lived as a famous woman to the advanced age of 105 years....[she] was mourned for seven days by the house of Israel.[72]

If we keep in mind this feminist analysis of one possible view of the role of women in Judaism during Jesus' time, it is important that we ask what this analysis might mean for sexual mores, morals, and practice in Jesus' life. Generally within history wherever there has been more freedom and respect for women, there has also been more permission for respect and celebration of human sexuality. Was this true within Jesus' life and ministry as well? Many of his interactions and relationships with women as reported in the canonical gospels are perhaps the most significant clues as to Jesus' thoughts and attitude

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[69] Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her: A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins* (New York: Crossroads, 1983), 107.
[70] Ibid., 115.
[71] Ibid.
[72] Ibid., 117.

toward sexuality. A few of these interactions and relationships include Jesus' support of Mary and her desire to learn rather than to serve in a more traditional female role, in addition to his willingness to allow Martha to provide a home for him during his visit (Luke 10:38-42); his defense of "the woman who outraged an all-male banquet not only by entering it but also by washing his feet with her hair (Luke 7:36-39); Jesus healing of the woman who suffered with the flow of blood (the only example in all of the canonical gospels of him referring to someone as "daughter" in Mark 5:25-34); Jesus' defense of the woman caught in the act of adultery (John 8:3-11); the theological dialogue that Jesus has with the Samaritan woman at the well (John 4:7-26); Jesus' healing of the daughter of the Syro-Phoenician woman after being taught a theological lesson in compassion and inclusion by her (Mark 7:25-30); and Jesus' appearance to Mary Magdalene first after his resurrection (John 20:11-18). He traveled in the company of women and was financially supported by some of them, including Joanna and Susanna (Luke 8:1-3). Jesus freely touched them to bring healing and an end to their suffering, and he showed no fear of talking openly with them. To the religious authorities who challenged him, he even defended the likes of tax-collectors and harlots who were the followers of John the Baptist (Matt. 21:31-32). As Schüssler Fiorenza notes:

> ...the stories assert, then, that Jesus and his movement invited into their table community not only women but even notorious and well-known sinners. Sinners, prostitutes, beggars, tax collectors, the ritually polluted, the crippled, and the impoverished – in short, the scum of Palestinian society – constituted that majority of Jesus' followers.[73]

[73] Schüssler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her*, 129.

No doubt Jesus' habit of defending and frequenting with the notorious erotic outlaws of his day, prostitutes, must have spoken volumes about the gossip of a *sexual nature* that more than likely swirled constantly around him because of his libertarian attitudes and actions toward women. We can never know for certain just how much this gossip may have affected Jesus' ministry, but his life experiences with women certainly point to someone who refused to allow himself to be constrained by the extreme limitations placed on social and sexual relationships between women and men in first century Palestinian Jewish culture. Might this refusal have given him the permission within himself to enjoy sexual or erotic connections with others? Again, while resisting the possible temptation to focus on finding "proof" of Jesus' sex life, it is helpful to view what references exist to the erotic in his encounters with others as colors that add a rich hue to the overall picture of who Jesus may have been.

It is within some of the Gnostic gospels that we can find vibrant instances of these colors, particularly in Jesus' relationships with Mary Magdalene and John, the beloved disciple, beginning with the *Gospel of Philip*: "...the companion of the [Savior is] Mary Magdalene. [But Christ loved] her more than [all] the disciples, and used to kiss her [often] on her [mouth]. The rest of [the disciples were offended]...They said to him, 'Why do you love her more than all of us?' The Savior answered and said to them 'Why do I not love you as (I love) her?'"[74] Evidence of Jesus' devotion to Mary is revealed again in the *Gospel of Mary* (as commented on by Pagels) when Peter protests Mary's teaching of the other disciples:

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[74] Elaine Pagels, *The Gnostic Gospels* (New York: Vintage Books, 1979), xv.

> 'Did he really speak privately with a woman, (and) not openly to us? Are we to turn about and all listen to her? Did he prefer her to us?' ...Levi breaks in at this point to mediate the dispute: 'Peter, you have always been hot-tempered. Now I see you contending against the woman like the adversaries. But if the Savior made her worthy, who are you, indeed, to reject her? Surely the Lord knew her very well. That is why he loved her more than us.'[75]

Another example of Jesus' great love for Mary is included at the beginning of this passage listed above from the *Gospel of Mary* when Peter says directly to her "Sister, we know that the Savior loved you more than the rest of the women. Tell us the words of the Savior which you remember..."[76] Certainly these statements about kisses, jealousy on the part of the other disciples, and Jesus' favoritism for Mary that is so evident even to Peter (who was not particularly known for being especially insightful) point to a relationship that had both deep physical and emotional meaning for Jesus. In addition to being the only companion of Jesus in all four of the canonical gospels who was reported to have been with him at the time of his death[77], *Pistis Sophia* also notes Jesus' prediction that Mary Magdalene and John would exceed all of the other disciples.[78]

It is significant that John is mentioned with Mary, since it has been presumed that he alone carries the unique title of being the disciple "whom Jesus loved" within the canonical gospels (the author of the gospel of John was anonymous until named later on by the early Church). Not only is he portrayed in the physically intimate pose of reclining against Jesus' breast at the final Passover meal that Jesus' shared with those who were closest to him (John 13:23), but he was also one of the two male disciples who were first to see Jesus' empty tomb after the resurrection (John 20:3-5). The gospel of John reveals

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[75] Ibid., 64-65.
[76] Elaine Pagels, *Beyond Belief: The Secret Gospel of Thomas* (New York: Random House, 2003), 104.
[77] Phipps, *The Sexuality of Jesus*, 123.
[78] Ibid.

a subtle but important point when the beloved disciple and Peter run to the tomb upon hearing from Mary that it is empty. Although the text says that both ran together and that Peter got there first, John could not bring himself to enter the tomb, even after he saw the linen wrappings lying there. Could this have been a deeply significant act, in that the fear of seeing Jesus' decomposed and traumatized body would have been too profoundly painful for the one who was his beloved? Or perhaps John's hope against all hope that Jesus had indeed risen from the dead was too overwhelming to allow himself to see that Jesus' crucified body was no longer there. Perhaps the love between Jesus and the beloved disciple was of the same intensity as that between Achilles and his lover Patroclus as described in Plato's *Symposium.* As explained by Boswell, Plato's *Symposium* describes "the eagerness of Achilles to join his lover Patroclus in death as an explicit parallel to a wife's being willing to die for her husband."[79] While we can never know for sure about the true nature of the relationship between Jesus and the beloved disciple, it is certain that the love between Jesus and this anonymous person was unique in its character and power, throughout and even beyond the life they shared together:

> That one disciple is singled out in *this* context as *the* disciple loved by Jesus is striking...The singling out of one who is loved by Jesus makes clear that some kind of love is at stake other than the love that united Jesus to the rest of his disciples. The text itself suggests that we should recognize here some form of love that certainly does not contradict the more general love of Jesus for all, but which does set it apart from this general love. A reasonable conclusion is that this difference points us to a different sphere or dimension of love: love characterized by erotic desire or sexual attraction.[80]

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[79] John Boswell, *Same-Sex Unions in Premodern Europe* (New York: Villard Books, 1994), 59.
[80] Theodore W. Jennings, Jr., *The Man Jesus Loved: Homoerotic Narratives From the New Testament* (Cleveland: The Pilgrim Press, 2003), 22.

One does not have to scratch very much at the surface of Jesus' life as recorded in the canonical and Gnostic gospels to find a description of someone who lived a deeply embodied life, characterized by passionate physical and emotional experiences and connections with others. The scope of this chapter is not broad enough to cover every instance of Jesus communicating with and touching others in the unique ways that he did. There are many other compassionate exchanges with women and loving encounters with men that are beyond what can be covered here, and yet they form a composite picture of a Jesus whose life and ways of loving should be described on some level as both erotic and full of passion. For those of us who have been thoroughly indoctrinated into an understanding of Jesus as celibate and solely without erotic passion, what might it mean for our lives if we could allow this more erotically vibrant picture of Jesus into our beliefs? What would it be like if more of us who live in the 21st century could allow ourselves the enjoy the freedom of imagination possessed by artists from before 1400 to the mid-16th century, artists who created scores of paintings "showing forth...the ostensive unveiling of the Child's sex, or the touching, protecting or presentation of it?"[81] Just as importantly, what might it mean if we could allow ourselves to bring the truth of our own lived experience of sexuality and spirituality to bear on our understandings of the erotic in Jesus' life? After all, as Martin reminds us, "We have a right to think about the sex of Jesus, the sexuality of Jesus, the desires of Jesus...As is the case with so many instances in all interpretation, how people interpret the sexuality of Jesus tells us more

[81] Leo Steinberg, *The Sexuality of Christ in Renaissance Art and in Modern Oblivion,* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1983), 3.

about the meaning of sex *for them* than for some "real" Jesus freed from interpretation."[82] How we interpret anything in the Bible, not the least of which is the sexuality of Jesus, can never be freed from the truth and meaning we find in our own lives.[83] But then, why should it? After all, it was Jesus himself who said "...you shall know the truth, and the truth will make you free." (John 8:32) It is to the erotic truth in specifically modern-day queer experiences that we now turn as we continue this exploration of the healing power of sexuality and spirituality within our bodies and lives.

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[82] Martin, *Sex and the Single Savior*, 102.
[83] Ibid., 2.

This chapter is dedicated to the memory of
Heather MacAllister
Diesel Femme, Fierce Fat Activist, and Dyke Dominatrix,
whose own courageous voice of sex and spirit
was silenced far too soon by ovarian cancer at the age of 39.

Chapter 4
Unleashing the Queer Voice of Sex and Spirit

In the introduction to this thesis I stated that this project is an exploration of sexual, spiritual power through the lenses of transformational experiences in the lives of queer people; womanist/feminist, and sex/pleasure-positive interpretations of Jewish and Christian scriptures; and the practice of SM and Ds in the context of both sexuality and spirituality. Just as I believe from a feminist and liberationist standpoint that it was important to begin this examination with the truth of queer lives and voices, so also do I believe that the final chapter of such an exploration requires the voices of queer people themselves speaking about their own sex-positive theologies and spirituality, and how both empower them to bring healing to our world. This final chapter is devoted to the wisdom and insights of six queer people who experience sex, SM and Ds on embodied as well as spiritual levels, and to providing an opportunity for the voices of these people to be heard. Lest I seemingly put these courageous individuals on exploitive display, I will share parts of my own story as well; like bell hooks, I believe that in the teaching that ministers are called upon to perform, we too must always be "holistically questing for self-actualization."[84] I am deeply grateful to the six people who shared intimate details with me about their quest for wholeness and self-actualization through their own sexual

[84]bell hooks, *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 16.

spirituality and their spiritual sexuality, and for the encouragement they gave me to do the same through the example they are actively setting.

As I have thought about this chapter and about my thesis project, the question of "why?" has come to me often. Why do I want to present the world with a different way of considering scripture when it comes to sex? Why do I want to educate others, and conservative religious communities in particular, about the joys of SM and Ds? Why do I want the sexual voices and stories of queer, spiritual people to be heard, especially those who enjoy SM and Ds in their lives? The answers to these questions are probably too numerous to explore in only one thesis project, but by way of introduction in this chapter, I want to offer at least a few.

The first is that, again, like bell hooks, "I celebrate teaching that enables transgressions – a movement against and beyond boundaries."[85] In my own personal life and within ministry as well, I have experienced and seen the abundant life that can often be the result of embracing transgression and transcending imposed boundaries. As a minister who works almost exclusively in the context of queer community, I also encounter people every day who are struggling to break free of the sexual and spiritual boundaries that have been forced upon them, boundaries that proclaim that God does not want them to be gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgendered, kinky, polyamorous, and/or non-monogamous. I celebrate and love teaching, preaching, and community building that helps people shatter these restrictive boundaries and grow into the people they feel they are created to be. When I write or teach about sexuality or SM/Ds, and when what I have

[85] Ibid., 12.

to offer opens up someone's eyes and heart to the truth of who they long to be, what they want in life, and how they are called to contribute in a positive way to life and community around them, nothing brings me more joy than watching that person embrace and step into that truth for the first time. It is my hope that what I write in this thesis about different ways to consider sex in the light of scripture and the truth of queer lives, as well as SM/Ds in the light of the deeply spiritual experiences of people who practice either or both, will offer anyone who reads it an experience of that potentially transgressive freedom in their own lives. As hooks also says, "to be charged by ideas was (is) pure pleasure,"[86] and anything I can do to help others experience this pleasure only adds to my own joy as I learn along with them through my teaching.

The second reason is that as a minister of good news, I believe I am called to immerse myself in the promotion of what Emmanuel Lartey calls "holism"[87] or working toward the "total well-being of all persons."[88] I believe that no one of any sexual orientation, myself included, can promote their total well-being or that of others if either sexuality or spirituality is left out of our personal and communal pictures. However, I also believe that many people are unable or unwilling to intentionally nurture their sexuality and spirituality due to the reality that they live in a societal state of crisis "created by a lack of meaningful access to truth"[89] about both. After 20 years in ministry

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[86] Ibid., 3.
[87]Emmanuel Lartey, *In Living Color: An Intercultural Approach to Pastoral Care and Counseling.* 2nd ed. (London & New York: Jessica Kingsley, 2003), 108; quoted in Karen B. Montagno, "Midwives and Holy Subversives: Resisting Oppression in Attending the Birth of Wholeness," *Injustice and the Care of Souls* ed. Sheryl A. Kujawa-Holbrook and Karen B. Montagno (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2009), 6.
[88] Ibid.
[89] bell hooks, *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 29.

it never ceases to amaze me how few people in the world actually know they can have excellent access to the truth about how to discover their sexual self, and about how few religious communities of all stripes ever offer their members experiences of worship, teaching, and kinship that can truly inspire them and help them grow spiritually in meaningful and lasting ways. Writing my thesis on this particular topic is a way for me to do what I can to address this crisis and to create one more avenue of access for anyone interested in further exploring the journey toward their own truth.

Finally, I often answer the many questions of "why" with this reply to myself: because I want to be the best minister that I can be. When I was 23 years old and just two weeks away from my scheduled ordination as a Southern Baptist minister, I made the fateful decision to come out to everyone. Although it meant the certain cancellation of my ordination and the loss of my ministry as a commissioned chaplain in the U.S. Army, I knew I could never be a healthy minister who supported others in their quest for abundant life if I was living a paralyzed and terrified life in the closet. That decision was just the beginning of my journey toward coming to know and understand myself. Later decisions and steps on that journey took me more deeply into understanding what sex and spirit both mean to me. I learned that both could simultaneously bless and curse me on my path, depending on how open I was to the gifts of wisdom and healing from each. Coming out and living my life as a lesbian in general, and exploring SM and Ds in my life in particular, have brought me to a place of agreement with Thich Nhat Hahn: "To know the real situation within ourselves, we have to survey our own territory thoroughly,

including the elements within us that are at war with each other. To bring about harmony, reconciliation, and healing within, we have to understand ourselves."[90] Writing this thesis has given me a tremendous opportunity to better understand myself, and I am grateful to have this privileged opportunity to continue unleashing my own voice and that of others as I expand the exploration of our queer territories in ever-deepening ways.

It is the height of irony that I am writing a thesis on sexuality and spirituality with a focus on topics as taboo as SM and Ds, sex in *The Song*, and the sexuality of Jesus. In the fundamentalist, Bible-Baptist home in which I was raised sexuality was never even mentioned, let alone discussed. I distinctly remember being so self-conscious about my own body in elementary and junior high school that I was actually embarrassed to even say the word "body." Although I didn't begin coming out to myself until I was 23, once I got to that point I came out fairly quickly to the rest of my world by the age of 24. By the age of 25 I was in therapy, trying desperately to heal my relationship with God that had been deeply damaged in my coming out process, and also trying to discover who I was after coming out into a queer life and world that were utterly foreign to me.

During this time I also entered into my first lesbian relationship, which lasted four and a half years. While I was with Margaret I began to very secretly come out to myself about another side of my sexuality – a side that had no room and no voice to be expressed in my life that was so consumed with coping in the aftermath of coming out as lesbian. I remember that once I very gingerly broached the subject of SM with Margaret; while I don't remember the exact words she said, I do know that her response left me with no

[90] Thich Nhat Hanh, "Self-Love," *Teachings on Love* (Berkeley: Parallax Press, 1998), 22.

uncertainty that SM would ever be something she wanted to try in our relationship. I kept my secret desires to myself for the time being, until Margaret and I eventually broke up. After giving myself a year or so to heal, I took my first timid steps into the world of SM and Ds by joining a women's educational group in San Francisco.

Now, almost 20 years since I took those first steps and many play partners later, I am so grateful for all that I have learned through SM play. SM has taught me what Thomas Moore speaks of in his book *Dark Eros*: "One of the most important moves in psychotherapy is to take whatever is presented and simply hold it and give it a place. A great deal of the trouble one hears in therapy has more to do with fighting what is given than with the given thing itself."[91] While SM is not therapy, I have found it to have therapeutic value in my life. In SM scenes I learned to accept my fantasies and desires and whatever they represented, rather than fight them with my own judgment and disapproval against myself. I learned that if I simply let all of the parts of myself just be within the safe and pre-negotiated world of SM play, including those parts that any number of communities (Christian, lesbian, feminist, etc.) would condemn, a wisdom and a sense of peace greater than anything I could ever have imagined before became mine.

Whether I am the top or the bottom, I have discovered that SM is an incredibly profound way to explore the depths and heights of things that are very difficult to access in our day to day lives: vulnerability, the power to destroy or create, pain transformed into pleasure, incredible centeredness, and realms of imagination and playfulness that can

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[91]Thomas Moore, *Dark Eros: the Imagination of Sadism* (Woodstock, Connecticut: Spring Publications, 1990), 7.

be all but non-existent for grown-ups in our world. Most of all, the more SM and Ds taught me about accepting and nurturing all of myself and others, the more I realized that this felt like a direct experience of the infinite compassion and love of God as well. This new understanding of the compassion of the Divine felt limitless, and taught me just how deeply "the tyrannies you swallow day by day and attempt to make your own"[92] about God had lived inside of me my whole life. Talking about, learning about, and engaging in SM/Ds play with others has done more than almost anything else to help me overcome the terrifying images of a God waiting around every corner to punish me that had lived inside of me for as long as I could remember. Perhaps more than anything else, SM/Ds play has taught me the meaning of love and power in the context of mutuality. When love and caring are present in a relationship between people who wish to explore all sides of power, domination is never something that demands submission. Submission is freely given with the understanding that it will be respected and cherished, and that the one who submits will be protected, nurtured, and cared for by the one who is dominant. The one who is dominant is also directed by the wishes and the limits of the one who submits. All parties are deeply committed to the well-being, growth, pleasure, and fulfillment of the other, and the possibility that all involved might switch at any given time from dominant to submissive is also real. This is a very different picture from the one I was given by the church of my youth that taught me about the nature of the power dynamics in my relationship with God. In that picture, God is always dominant and must always be unquestionably obeyed. Although I was taught that God loved me, that love was always

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[92]Audre Lorde, "The Transformation of Silence Into Language and Action," *Sister Outsider* (Freedom, CA: The Crossing Press, 1984), 41.

conditional on meeting God's demands (heterosexuality and living as a submissive woman were at the top of the list of those demands); my needs and limits were secondary at best and sinful at worst. Although I was expected to submit freely to God out of love and a sense of devotion, how freely given could my submission really be with the threat of hellfire and damnation always hanging over my head if I refused to meekly obey? The possibility that God and I could actually live together in a love relationship of mutuality, where God takes joy in me and I find joy in the Divine living within me, was never considered to be an option. Today, thanks to my experience of SM/Ds and the unconditional love of the Divine I discovered through it, I am very happy to say that my life will no longer be limited by the particular tyrannies given to me by the church and theology in which I was raised.

In addition to reflecting on my own experience of sexuality and spirituality, I had the privilege and honor of interviewing six people who allowed me to question them about their spirituality, sexuality, and relationship with the God of their naming for this thesis. Together they reflect a wide diversity of spiritual beliefs, sexual practices, and life experiences. For the most part I asked all of them the same questions (see appendix 2), although they vary a bit from person to person depending on their spiritual and sexual path. For the most part the questions they answered centered around three areas: their relationship to the Divine and how it has evolved, the relationship of their sexuality to their spirituality, and what they wish others knew about their experience of queer sexuality and/or SM/Ds and how both relate to their relationship with the Divine. Most, but not all, of those I interviewed enjoyed some form of SM and/or Ds in their lives, and

most included vanilla sex as a critically important part of their spirituality as well. All of them had beautiful and powerful truths to share about how their sexual and spiritual power flows through and nourishes them in their queer lives and contributions to our world.

Philip[93]

Phillip identifies as an able bodied, genderqueer biological male and a "North American mutt." He is working class but overeducated in a low paying field, 43 years old, a Unitarian Universalist, an SM bottom mostly who has enjoyed topping occasionally, and someone who is fairly pansexual but who has mostly had sex with other men. He was raised Roman Catholic but felt very unwelcome in the church, especially in his late teens. At the age of 18 he left what he described as the "homophobic, patriarchal, oppressive, misogynistic church" until he was about 36. At that time he went into therapy and discovered that in the midst of his struggles, what he was really missing in his life was an experience of Spirit. He found his way into a local Unitarian Universalist church, and three years later he entered seminary.

I asked Phillip to share with me the difference between what he was taught about God growing up in the Roman Catholic Church and the God of his understanding now. His response was that growing up he learned that it is not possible to have a direct relationship with Eternal Spirit (his preferred name for God), and that this is something that can only happen through a priest who acts as mediator. He also learned that he should accept that no one is smart enough to "get it" on their own, and that he shouldn't

[93]"Philip," interviewed by author, San Francisco, CA, August 7, 2009.

ask too many questions. Phillip spent many years unlearning these teachings, and his understanding now is that, as co-creators who are a part of creation, we all have the capacity and the responsibility to tap into our relationship with Eternal Spirit, the source of all.

Phillip's current understanding of sexuality is also vastly different from the one he was given in his youth. When I asked him what the Roman Catholic church taught him about sexuality, he said the teachings he received could be summed up in one word: "bad," along with the fact that as a queer person he would go to hell when he died. Nothing else could be further from the truth for Phillip today as he revels in a wide variety of sexual and spiritual practices that he feels enable him to tap deeply into his relationship with the Divine. These practices include everything from spanking to cross-dressing to submission, from piercing to prayer in all kinds of ways. He defines prayer as anything that enables him to connect with the energy that unites us all, as deepening his consciousness with intentionality, as calling into his presence the Spirit of the universe and the spirits of other people in his life, and as holding in his heart in a healing way all those who need a little bit more love to get them through their suffering. Sexual fun and playfulness, and giving himself fully to someone who "owns" him within a scene or a relationship are activities that nourish him deeply both sexually and spiritually. He also finds Eternal Spirit "most profoundly in the paradoxes of life and SM/Ds: that we often heal through pain, that grieving and loss make us stronger, that we can grow closer through fighting, that what scares us can nourish us, and that we can learn to love more deeply through hurting one another."

Perhaps more than anyone else I interviewed, Phillip reminded me of the question asked by the late Marcella Althaus-Reid that I first mentioned in chapter 1: "Is theology the art of putting your hands under the skirts of God?...can we then redefine theology as, for instance, a reflection on God closely related to loving arts of intimacy with the Beloved?"[94] As I talked with Phillip I could hear and see him living out this question with a playful grin on his face as he described many of the loving arts of intimacy in which he engages with others that lead him into the heart of God. He clearly enjoys putting his hands under those divine skirts with others (as well as wearing them himself). When I asked him the final question of "what do you most wish that other religious people knew about SM/Ds who are not practitioners themselves," his reply was this: "That God lives in everything we do – even the scary stuff. Especially in the scary stuff."

Jasmine[95]

Perhaps because of the pseudonym she chose for this interview, Jasmine's words led me to reflect upon the theology of the Náhuatl, the native Mexican people of Juan Diego. "The Náhuatl theologians stated: 'It may be that no one on earth can tell the truth, except through flower and song.' Rational discourse clarifies yet limits the mind, while flowers and song stimulate the imagination to ponder the infinite."[96] Jasmine's beliefs reveal how her imagination and personal experiences have been critically important in

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[94]Marcella Althaus-Reid, "Queer I Stand," 99.
[95] "Jasmine," interviewed by author, San Francisco, CA, August 10, 2009.
[96]Eric H.F. Law, "Flowers and Songs: A Liturgical Approach to Pastoral Care," in *Injustice and the Care of Souls: Taking Oppression Seriously in Pastoral Care*, ed. Sheryl A. Kujawa-Holbrook and Karen B. Montagno (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2009), 175-176.

her journey toward pondering the infinite through the union of her spirituality with her sexuality.

Jasmine identifies as a 67 year old lesbian, caucasian female who grew up upper-middle class and is now middle-class. She is a switch (she enjoys playing the role of both top and bottom), reasonably able-bodied, and married/non-monogamous. While she feels connected to Christianity, she does not identify as Christian. Like Phillip, Jasmine also grew up Catholic; as an adult she belonged to what she described as a very politically radical Catholic community, but she left the Catholic Church completely when she came out as a lesbian at the age of 40. Ten years later she tried the Episcopal Church briefly, but eventually found her spiritual home at Metropolitan Community Church (MCC).

Jasmine had this to say about the evolution of her understanding of the Divine during her life: "The Catholic Church taught me how I should relate to God: that God made me to know him, to love him, to serve him in this world, and to be happy with him in the next. Through the process of my own searching and questioning, I have come to understand that Spirit (Jasmine's preferred name for God) is an energy that exists in the world and in human beings, and particularly in people. Divine Spirit is manifested through people and in nature, and through ourselves when we are able to access the highest parts of ourselves." I was particularly drawn to Jasmine's concept of what spirituality and religion are to her: "To me spirituality is kind of an individual thing. It has to do with my own personal process and rituals and the ways I connect with divinity within me and nature and others. Religion is a structure in which ritual and celebration and community can happen. Religion at its best can provide a group manifestation and

communal experience of the divine." These words again made me think of the use of flower and song in ritual within church, and how we can choose to use both in conventional ways that do little to challenge our congregations on issues related to justice (a pretty arrangement on the altar with hymns that reinforce the status quo), or in more radical ways that open us to new experiences of the divine and God's vision of social justice for our world (i.e. a retelling of the story of Juan Diego from the perspective of the oppressed people of Mexico, with flowers and songs that "interrupt the unhelpful rituals that reinforce the power of the dominant group[97]).

For Jasmine, her sexuality is deeply linked to her spirituality. When she engages in sexual connection with another (or others), whether SM/Ds is involved or not, she feels that what she is doing is another opportunity to be connected to universal love; it is a God-given gift that is meant to be used and celebrated and shared. When I asked Jasmine to elaborate more on what her experience of spirituality through SM or vanilla sex continues to teach her about the nature of Spirit, she had these beautiful words to share: "My sexual practices and experiences accentuate what I already believed about Spirit being most available in and through bodies and in and through human connection, and especially in loving human connection. My experience of SM is especially an experience of presence; my mind is rarely able to be anywhere else except where I am during SM...SM has been a wonderful experience of being totally in the moment with my body and with the person I am with, which I think is an experience of Spirit."

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[97] Ibid., 176.

For the Náhuatl, the beauty of flowers and song is critically important for human imaginations if we are to be able to ponder the infinite. It is Jasmine's wish, though, that more people could allow themselves to imagine the beauty in the strength, possibilities for growth, for love, and for connections with Spirit that can happen through SM. "I wish that others (religious or not) understood that it is not about abuse or about hurting people, that the paradox of power that exists in choosing to participate in what seems like a powerless position actually provides such great opportunities. It has been very interesting for me to meet so many people for whom SM is such an essential part of their life – it's their church in a way. I've been very touched by the people I've met and the ways they live with authenticity and love with SM being a core part of how they walk in the world."

Cheri[98]

Cheri identifies as an African-American, 53-year old, able-bodied, middle class lesbian. She grew up in a predominantly African-American Baptist church that she recalls as being largely silent on the issue of sexuality. She told me, "I never heard any message about sex. The only thing I remember is that once a man and woman were married, they could have children. There wasn't any message at all for anyone who wasn't married, or who didn't want to be married, or for someone like me." She was taught that Jesus died for our sins, and that it is only through baptism and constant practice that humanity can be forgiven and go to heaven.

Through her relationships with other women (including intimate relationships), and through having her experience as a lesbian validated at MCC, Cheri has arrived at the

[98] "Cheri," interviewed by the author, San Francisco, CA, September 19, 2009.

place today where God is everything and everywhere to her – a nameless, faceless connective energy that resides in her and everyone and all creation. Rather than being a source of judgment, her spirituality today feels like the connection between all people and all things, as well as her connection to herself. She believes that "the more deeply we allow ourselves to experience every aspect of ourselves, that is how much more deeply we can experience those things in other people."

In her groundbreaking work with the human voice in the 1930s, Iris Warren chose not to "deal directly with the suffering voice (of her clients who were actors) but with the physical and mental tensions caused by blocked emotions."[99] Because she was sexually molested as an infant, Cheri's sexual "voice" (her ability to be fully present with her sexual self with others) was inhibited because of her internal emotions that blocked full access to her sexual power and joy. When I asked her if she felt like her sexuality is a spiritual part of herself, she said, "It absolutely does, but only recently. (Because of being molested as an infant) I feel like my sexuality has always been repressed. It has been very hard for me to receive, even though I can be a fantastic lover for others. My ability to receive love from my partner brings me a deeper awareness of myself and her, and a deeper spiritual connection. I am still learning how to make this happen, because I still have some inhibitions around it. Sometimes I'll go to a certain level and then need to pull back because of fear. But my partner supports me in whatever I need to do, and that trust I have in her because of her support is invaluable to my process of allowing my body to be a spiritual vessel. It feels like God becomes flesh in my body, and in the two of us

[99]Kristen Linklater, *Freeing the Natural Voice,*(Hollywood, CA: Drama Publishers, 2006) 5.

together. It's my body, and her body, and God's body – the trinity!" Hearing Cheri's story about her own sexual and spiritual healing through the love she shares with her partner, and the healing connections she has with other women, is to me a demonstration of the truth of this statement by Linklater: "To free the voice is to free the person, and each person is indivisibly mind and body."[100] Because Cheri is living a life today where no part of her voice has to remain silent, she is experiencing the Divine in ways she has never known before until recently. Her experience of sexuality today has taught her that God is "expansive and limitless and powerful and awesome. " She now believes that God is caring and supportive, and that everything is possible. When I asked her what she most wishes other religious people knew about the role of sexuality in her life, she said, "I wish they understood that what is most important is having connections with other people, whether you decide you want one partner, or three partners, a man, a woman, or someone transgendered. It's all about connection. Whatever consensual connection people have with each other is good. I wish they could accept whatever the connection is, even if that is not what they want for themselves, and that whatever that connection is, is righteous."

Marilyn[101]

"We also speak of peak experiences. These are times in our lives when we felt in touch with greater forces than in our ordinary condition...These are likely times when we reach up to touch levels of consciousness beyond those with which we normally deal."[102]

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[100] Ibid., 8.
[101] Marilyn Hollinger interviewed by the author, San Francisco, August 17, 2009.
[102] Bert Herrman, *The Hand Book,* (San Francisco: Alamo Square Press, 1991), 108.

Marilyn is a woman who loves peak experiences that are full of joy. She is 46 years old and uses these words to identify herself: Jewish, white, female, lesbian, Femme, fat, middle/upper middle class, liberal, and mostly able-bodied. Unlike most of the others I interviewed, Marilyn did not feel burdened by a great deal of harmful theology from her youth that she had to overcome. Although she grew up conservative Jewish, her family went to synagogue only periodically and did not observe the Sabbath as a day of rest (although they did say Sabbath prayers most weeks). Her religious education consisted mostly of learning about Jewish history, people, and culture, but did not include Hebrew lessons. She remembers that there wasn't a lot of discussion about God, but what she did hear taught her that God was "kind of a wise old man, a being, who taught you things." She and her family always associated God with justice and fairness – especially fairness. When it came to sexuality, she received nothing in her religious education in the way of teaching. She doesn't remember anything negative either, just an absence of anything at all.

When I asked her who God is to her today, Marilyn replied, "As I have grown up I experience God existentially, more as a collective consciousness. I feel like I am experiencing God when I am in the presence of joy, and when good is being done. It makes me feel connected to something bigger than myself, and it makes me think 'this has to be God.'" Spirituality is where peak experiences come in for Marilyn. For her, spirituality is about seeking that connection to something bigger, and the way she does this is through finding ways to get to that place of connection, whether it is through sex,

or holding a baby, or spending joyous time with loved ones, or sitting outside smelling trees. These are all peak experiences that give her a taste of what the Divine is to her.

Orgasm is a particularly powerful spiritual experience for Marilyn, and she leaves no doubt of this in her description: "Orgasm takes me completely into embodied bliss, an explosive joy that is too big to be contained in my body. It's like I'm everywhere all at once; it is more than my body. That is the same feeling that I have when I have a very intense spiritual experience of other kinds. I just can't contain it. That act of getting to that place is a spiritual journey, and my sexuality can take me to that place in many different ways." SM is a particularly important part of those spiritual journeys that Marilyn takes, and is critically important to the connection she feels with God through her body. She told me that SM makes her feel strong and very good about her body, which enables her to connect with others, and thus with herself and God. "SM is the joyous way I have sex. Joyous sex helps to validate that my body isn't wrong; it has helped me to accept my body with its limitations. The thing I get specifically from SM is the feeling of being strong and resilient and creative. This makes me feel good about my body, and prevents me from being grounded in negativity or depression or self-hatred, which prevents me from getting to those joyous places where I connect with God."

In her life today, Marilyn is convinced that sex is an absolutely right and joyous thing, and it is the ultimate way to connect with the Divine. When I asked her what she most wished other people knew about SM in particular, she told me this: "I wish they knew that sexuality is a part of God, that it is a good, positive, spiritual thing that helps you to be closer to God. I wish they knew that SM is not harmful; it is very loving and

nurturing and trusting, and it can also bring you closer to God because of the intense joy it creates. I think most people never experience the kind of intense joy I feel when I play."

M. Saraswati[103]

Although I don't remember the exact date when I met Saraswati, we have known each other for a number of years – long enough for me to experience her as one of the most grounded, compassionate, wise, and peaceful persons I know. She is a former journalist, a published author, a performance artist, and a teacher of writing. Because I have watched her over the years support and assist so many other women in finding their voices and discovering their sexual and spiritual power, I also think of her as the kind of person described by Karen Montagno: "The function of the midwife is seemingly simple and practical, to attend to birth...The midwife seeks to preserve health and ensure safety – attending, listening, witnessing to the process and what is emerging...There is attention to forces not seen, but at work."[104] Saraswati has attended to the spiritual and sexual birth of many women through performing with them, coaching them, and journeying with them as they write their stories and share their voices publicly. In this sacred work she is informed and grounded by her understanding of her own sexuality and relationship with the Divine.

Saraswati identifies as a person of color, and as a queer, Femme dyke lesbian of South Asian/Indo-American ethnicity. She is 38 years old, middle class, and not disabled,

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[103] "M. Saraswati," interviewed by the author, August 18, 2009.

[104] Karen B. Montagno, Midwives and Holy Subversives: Resisting Oppression in Attending the Birth of Wholeness," in *Injustice and the Care of Souls: Taking Oppression Seriously in Pastoral Care,* ed. Sheryl A. Kujawa-Holbrook and Karen B. Montagno (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2009), 8.

and her SM orientation is bottom/girl. She grew up mildly Hindu as she described it; her parents didn't pray at home every day or go to temple a great deal, mainly because her family did not live near a temple. They celebrated some of the holy days, and her parents tried to give her education in the basic principles of karma and dharma, as well as some knowledge of who the important gods and goddesses were. In her life today she has practiced meditation at a Zen center using different styles of Buddhist meditation, and she also does yoga. She has a mystic/ecstatic side to her spirituality, along the lines of the Sufi poets Hafiz and Rumi, and her spirituality is informed by feminist writers such as Gloria Anzaldúa, Luisah Teish, and Starhawk. Saraswati is very grateful not to have grown up with a very strong moralistic or religious worldview that involved a lot of guilt and the idea of sin. Instead, she feels that "at the best moments my sexuality and spirituality are connected...desire is very pure and it's a spiritual impulse, like what Audre Lorde talks about in her essay on erotic power. Desire is the thing that points us toward truth."

SM/Ds is also a central part of Saraswati's life and truth, and is a vehicle through which she is able to experience God as lover, especially when she is in a deep place of submission that makes her feel like a supplicant or worshipper of another. In that submission is about letting go and trusting another person deeply, she finds that SM can connect her to the part of spirituality that is also about letting go and "giving it up." It is a reminder to her that she doesn't have to control everything; she only has to trust that the universe will work things out in the way they are supposed to go. She finds that her most intense spiritual moments sometimes involve SM, but mostly they are those times when

all the parts of her get to connect – her queer self, her spiritual self, her little girl and grown-up selves, her artist self and political self. Those powerful, unified moments can come through sex, and they can also happen with a "really amazing day of writing."

When I closed our interview with the question about what she wished other religious people know about the relationship of SM to her spirituality and connection with the Divine, Saraswati said, "Honestly, I think the people who are truly religious know it already…that God is everywhere, in the bedroom, in the dungeon, in the kinky section of the lingerie store. But God is not there to judge, not there to spy, but there to enjoy and love all the varieties of experience."

Master Dan[105]

Given the high percentage of people with Catholic backgrounds in SM/Ds circles, it is fitting that my last interview was with yet one more person who was raised Roman Catholic. Master Dan, a 66 year-old caucasian, able-bodied, gay male, middle class college professor and top, was raised in a very small town with one fundamentalist (as he described it) Catholic church. Although he never attended Catholic school (a fact for which he is grateful), he did receive the full indoctrination of the Church's teachings about sexuality, namely, that he should both fear it and feel guilty about it. On the positive side of what he learned growing up, both the mystery of the Divine and the Mass and Eucharist remain with him to this day as beneficial parts of his spirituality. The ritual of Catholic worship and the power of such ritual also made an impression on him. Like

[105] "Master Dan," interviewed by the author, San Francisco, CA August 19, 2009.

many gay men in the SM community, today he seeks spiritual fulfillment and release through the rituals and rites of bondage and SM/Ds.[106]

For Master Dan the worst part of his experience with Catholicism is that it alienated his spirit from his body. Likewise, he feels that the worst thing that Christianity in general did for him was separate his body from his soul. SM/Ds provides a crucial connector for him between his body and his spiritual self. In describing this connection, he said, "Something happens at a very deep level when I am playing with someone else and as a top I am feeling extraordinarily powerful, vulnerable, and humble. That place is where all the boundaries get erased – boundaries that we make within ourselves, between others – even the boundary between top and bottom gets erased. It is at this point that BDSM becomes a spiritual experience. This is the reason I keep doing SM. It is this deepening that keeps taking place, and that continues to erase everything that separates me from myself and others." In his life today his relationship with the Divine is about mystery, wholeness, and feeling centered in his body. SM/Ds (especially Ds) makes Master Dan feel like his body is a part of himself, and a part of the world as a whole. It also gives him an understanding of his own body and being, and that of his play partner(s) as sacred: "I would (rather) say the flesh becomes divine…I think I become divine, and so does the bottom I am playing with."

When I asked him what he most wishes other religious people knew about SM/Ds, he said, "That it is one of the most non-exploitive relationships one can have in

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[106]Thomas Peterson, "Gay Men's Spiritual Experience in the Leather Community, in *Gay Religion*, ed. Scott Thumma and Edward Gray (Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira Press, 2005), 337.

the world when it is done responsibly. It is the exact opposite of one person exploiting another...When I play with bottoms, they often say that they feel much more empowered afterwards, and I wish people knew this, those who are religious, and those who aren't. SM is about opening oneself to connections that are way beyond oneself, and I want them to know this about SM and spirituality in general. In listening to Master Dan answer this question, I couldn't help but draw a parallel to religion. Isn't religion, when it is practiced at its best, about opening ourselves up to that which is beyond us, and making connections with something that is empowering and far bigger than we are alone?

At the conclusion of these interviews I found myself returning to the question of "why" once again. Although the answers to the question are still numerous, there is one answer in particular that stands out. Marilyn concluded her interview by saying, "I think people can be closer to God through intense joy, and that most people never experience this kind of joy. I think most people never experience the kind of intense joy I feel when I play." When all is said and done, this is why I am doing this work: because human sexuality presents such profound opportunity for spiritual joy and deep connection with the Divine through the experience of physical pleasure, and far too many people have been separated from this opportunity by religious institutions and beliefs. In attempting the very difficult task of trying to communicate the spiritual insights shared with me by those I interviewed in a distilled form suitable for this thesis, I was repeatedly struck by how spiritually brilliant we can all be when we are sexually aware and pursuing what brings us sexual joy. Over and over again the message I received is this: whether through SM/Ds, vanilla sex, or both, what we do sexually is one of the most powerful and

primary methods we have at our disposal for immersing ourselves deeply in connection with ourselves, with others, and with the Divine, no matter how we name that Being. Larry Patten says that, "Always, in every faith and language, on this side of heaven there is an alleluia."[107] I believe this is true, in every possible faith tradition and spiritual practice, and in all kinds of languages. For those who practice SM and/or Ds in particular, the language we speak, and the poetry we have to offer in that language, is the idiom of power. SM and Ds recognize that we live in a universe that is swirling at any given moment with all kinds of power: creative, regenerative power, power offered, power taken, power given away, and power assumed and used for the good of oneself and others. For leatherfolk who connect SM and Ds to religion and spirituality, power may also be viewed through the lens of our religious traditions, teachings, and sacred writings. We are made in the image of the Divine, and thus are vessels of Divine power that can be used or abused according to our choice. Our ancestors and spiritual leaders include people like Moses, Judith, and Jesus, all individuals who both used power and freely accepted submission to carry out the will of God. We have faith and trust in one another, even in the context of unequal power dynamics that have been freely chosen, just as the heroes of our religious traditions trusted God for all things in their lives, sometimes willingly, and sometimes with great struggle. It is this language that we speak with one another when we play that enables us to learn about our own personal power and how we might use it in the world. It teaches us to be both trustworthy and to trust, because playing with power demands both for the safety and well-being of all involved. Whether

[107]Larry Patten, "What We Can Do is Sing," *Spirituality and Health* (2008): 39.

through the transcendent states we sometimes experience through physical pain in SM, or the emotional and psychological waves we ride through the power dynamics of Ds, we often find ourselves discovering a force and a Spirit bigger than we can ever know by ourselves, and we feel connected to that energy and Spirit through the mutual trust, caring, and language we share with those with whom we play. This is the particular practice of praise, the alleluia of those who dance with power through SM and Ds. Whether we are talking about the language of leather, of a specific country, the idioms of queer people, the dialect of scripture or specific faith traditions, or the vernacular of sexual and sensual pleasure, there is always an alleluia. I have written this thesis with the hope that it will support others, but those in my congregation and denomination in particular, in singing their own beautiful and unique praises to all that they name as Divine.

Conclusion

As I write the conclusion to this thesis, the landmark federal court trial challenging Proposition 8 in California (the law denying marriage equality to same-gender couples) has just drawn to a close. For weeks during the trial, the value of the relationships and the efficacy of the love between gay and lesbian couples have been endlessly examined and debated.[108] This has all happened as if there is nothing at all wrong with putting the most treasured and intimate details of human love on the witness stand for cross-examination. At the same time in the nation of Uganda, the government there is seriously contemplating a new law that includes execution as a possible punishment for those convicted of the "crime" of homosexuality. And in San Francisco this past week, the Rev. Fred Phelps and his followers from Westboro Baptist Church in Kansas picketed at various locations around the city. Many of the protesters from his church held signs proclaiming the message they have carried for years from city to city across the U.S.: "God hates fags," and "Thank God for AIDS."

These are the messages the people of my congregation absorb, either directly or indirectly, consciously or unconsciously, in the world around them every day, no matter what they identify as their spiritual orientation. At the same time they struggle to embrace and maintain their grasp on the dignity that their ways of loving and living spiritually deserve. What many of us at MCCSF know through our own experience of same-gendered love and sexual pleasure is that our queer bodies, spiritual practices, and sexual pleasures are inseparable and sacred, no matter who tries to tell us differently.

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[108] Keen News Service, www.keennewsservice.com, January 2010.

Phillip, Jasmine, Cheri, Marilyn, M. Saraswati, and Master Dan know this as well, and they are living, breathing embodiments of the deepest of all queer spiritual truths: that *human sexuality is a profoundly powerful gateway to spiritual joy and connection to whatever we name as the Divine.* Although in this particular thesis much of my focus has been on scriptures and teachings connected to Judaism and Christianity, it is interesting to note how much of the positive side of these scriptures and teachings are very present in the lives of these six individuals for whom traditional Judaism and Christianity mean very little. As queer people (most of whom actively engage in SM) who live and love far outside the boundaries of what Western society and conservative Christianity would call acceptable, how different are they from the Shulamite woman and her lover? *The Song* tells the story of two people living in the moment and in an intense pursuit of sexual joy; Marilyn lives her life and finds her spiritual power in the pursuit of such sexual joy as well, particularly that found in SM. The Shulamite woman and her beloved ask the reader to consider that there are many way to connect with the Divine, and to realize that the sacred is all around us. So too does Phillip remind us that God is in everything, and that prayer is anything (including sex and SM) that enables us to connect with the energy that unites us all and calls us continually into the presence of Spirit.

There are probably very few dominant Christian voices in Western culture today that would enthusiastically equate the life and example of Jesus with the lives and examples set by those I interviewed in chapter four. Yet, in that chapter, I demonstrated how eroticism in Jesus' life is most clearly evident in his physical, passionate, and loving connection with others. Repeatedly in the interviews I conducted, I heard how much each

person valued connection with others and how they experienced this connection as their bond with the Divine, as well as the essential role of sexuality in fostering and nurturing that connection. For Jasmine it is SM that connects her to universal love, and it is through her body and through loving connection with others that she lives in the presence of universal Spirit. God is in everything, is everywhere, and connects Cheri to all people and all things; it is her ability to receive love particularly through sex that nurtures her deepest spiritual relationship and connection to God. M. Saraswati finds that it is the act of submission in SM and Ds that enables her to let go of anything holding her back from connecting with God and others, and that sexuality and spirituality are themselves erotically and inseparably connected in her life. Master Dan is grateful for the fact that SM erases whatever boundaries there are in his life that keep him separated from himself, others and God; it is sex and SM that replace alienation with deep connection to all that lies beyond himself.

The importance of relationship with the Divine through relationship with others that is such a priority in the lives of all those I interviewed points to another essential truth of queer spirituality: *sexually empowered people are compassionate people, with deep empathy for the suffering of others and a desire to ease that suffering*. It is very difficult to simultaneously live with one's heart open from experiencing sexual joy with others, while also having a heart closed to the needs of other people who are hurting. Perhaps this is why members of the leather community are often such socially active and concerned people, committed to serving and alleviating the suffering of others through their service, regardless of whether they identify as a top or a bottom. All those I

interviewed who are active in BDSM can each certainly testify to the strength of the leather community's commitment to raising money for those in need, and to serving the most vulnerable in our society through their involvement in leather social/educational groups and through positions of leadership within those organizations.

Each in their own way, *The Song* and the life of Jesus reveal sexual love and pleasure as gifts from God, as well as how the joy and power of eroticism can enable us to live in spiritual connection with ourselves, God, and others. These same ancient, scriptural lessons are revealed in the present-day lives of those I interviewed, as time and again they spoke of God becoming flesh through their bodies and sexual practices, of sexual pleasure being inseparable from spiritual experience, of the truth and spiritual impulse within sexual desire, and of the empowering, connective, spiritual gift that is their experience of SM.

Ironically, I found that the words of those who practice SM and Ds in their lives often reflected foundational truths of traditional theology. In healthy SM and Ds, submission is given freely and out of a sense of caring and love for the one who is dominant. Likewise, the one who is dominant does not wield power through demand and intimidation (unless, of course, that particular style of play has been negotiated and mutually agreed to before play begins). Faith, trust, and love are the cornerstones of any SM/Ds relationship, just as faith, trust, and love are essential cornerstones of a healthy and nurturing relationship with the Divine. What a powerful paradox it is that SM and Ds provide such a model of devotion, love, and service that we might ideally seek with one another and with the Divine of our naming. How different this is from the

disempowering and debilitating model of the relationship so many of us have been taught to seek with the dominant and domineering God of more conservative religious traditions! The liberating and healing truths gained by those I interviewed were discovered through lived experience and were shared with me in a spirit of joy and gratitude. I was grateful to receive these truths as well, and was struck again and again in all of the interviews I conducted with the beauty, love, and spiritual power gained through sexual experience that each person could offer as sacred gifts to The Church, if only these gifts would be welcome.

Phillip, Jasmine, Cheri, Marilyn, M. Saraswati, and Master Dan were not born into the truths they shared with me, and most had to overcome deeply conservative and damaging theological teachings about sexuality that they received early in life from Christianity. They did not overcome these obstacles or heal from the spiritual wounds they sustained by willing themselves into different beliefs, but through their actual lived experience of sex and SM that gave them a new understanding of the love of the Divine through the love and pleasure they discovered with others. They found wholeness through what they did with their bodies and shared sexually with others that enabled them to experience the union of their sexuality and spirituality; in so doing they found the healing power that expanded their ability to love themselves, to love others, and to live in a state of love with all that they name as Divine.

The individuals in chapter four are living examples of the tremendous wisdom, healing power, and joy that queer people can bring to the world because we have the ability to understand at such a profound level that sexuality and spirituality are

inseparable. At MCCSF we are proud of these gifts we can offer, and so we encourage queer people to engage in sex for the pure pleasure of it and call the vitality of the passion we experience "spiritual." We sing and pray together with great joy in our sanctuary and know that we are creating the erotic together in our midst. We welcome people in leather, families with three partners, and those in open (non-monogamous) relationships and understand that we are welcoming the Divine in our midst. We know that it is our sexual lives that give us spiritual power, and our spiritual practices that bring us sexual joy. Perhaps more than anything else, we do all that we can to support one another in remembering this: it is what we do with our queer bodies that connects us to God (however we name that Being) and Eternal Spirit, and that nothing can destroy this truth.

In his beautiful book *Prayers of the Cosmos*, author Neil Douglas-Klotz offers his interpretation of "blessed are the merciful, for they shall obtain mercy" from the Aramaic: "Tuned to the Source are those who shine from the deepest place in their bodies. Upon them shall be the rays of universal love."[109] In spite of many religious voices attempting to compel us to believe differently, we are learning in ever-more powerful ways that we are in touch with the Source – however we name the Divine – from the deepest place *in our bodies*. The more we touch that deep place through sensuality, through beauty in the world around us, through erotic energy and connection with ourselves and others, and through all kinds of sexual practices and pleasures, the more we both understand love and expand our capacity to create it in the world around us. This universal love that comes from the union of sexuality and spirituality in our lives

[109] Neil Douglas-Klotz, *Prayers of the Cosmos: Reflections on the Original Meaning of Jesus' Words* (San Francisco: HarperOne, 1993), 43.

is the healing power that we have to offer to the world around us. It is the spiritual power grounded in the truth of our sexual experience that we can use to bless others.

It is my hope that my congregation, and queer people of faith and spirituality everywhere, will continue to grow in our understanding of this power, in our ability to love ourselves and our desires, and in our acceptance of the truth that the Divine takes great joy in both our prayers and our sexual play. It is also my hope that this thesis can provide support to the queer people who are on their journey toward embracing their spiritual and erotic power – whether they are a Baptist baby dyke, a life-long monogamous Catholic gay couple, or a genderqueer bisexual Buddhist switch in leather. I look forward with faith and trust to the day when queer people everywhere know that this power is their birthright, and theirs to enjoy with the blessing of the Divine.

Appendix 1: Definitions

BDSM: Popular acronym for "bondage, discipline, sadomasochism, and masochism." I will use this acronym to refer to any number of sexual and spiritual practices that involve the consensual use of bondage and/or sensory-deprivation techniques and/or sexual play that involves dynamics of power through dominant and submissive role-playing.

Celibacy: The intentional choice to not engage in sexual acts with oneself or others, perhaps for reasons of personal or spiritual growth.

Ds: Abbreviation for domination and submission, which refers to (usually) sexual practices that incorporate the exchange of power between one or more persons who are identified as dominant, and one or more persons who identify as submissive. Practitioners of Ds are often also practitioners of SM, and vice-versa, but not always.

Because I believe that Ds is a particular kind of practice that has characteristics that make it significantly different from SM, I will not use the term "SM" in my thesis to refer to both SM and Ds. I will refer to both separately, or I will use the term "BDSM" (see below).

Feminism/feminist: The movement to eliminate political, cultural, social, professional discrimination and oppression against women. One who advocates for equal rights for women.

Femme and Butch: Terms often used by LGBT people to describe respectively, feminine and masculine traits, behavior, style, expression, self-perception, gender performance and so on among women who do not identify as heterosexual. Both words may be used as adjectives, but are also considered by some to be separate genders.

Kinky: A word used to describe an activity or person connected to sexual practices, proclivities, or fantasies that involve BDSM or Ds.

Leather/leatherfolk: Harkening back to the early days in the 1940s and 50s of the leather/Levi gay bars in cities such as San Francisco, "leather" is a term that is often used synonymously to describe sex that incorporates sadomasochism and/or domination and submission. People who engage in such activities are sometimes referred to as "leatherfolk;" the term "leathersex" is also synonymous with SM and Ds. A "leatherdyke" is a woman who identifies as a lesbian who practices SM and/or Ds.

MCC San Francisco: The second-oldest church in the denomination of Metropolitan Community Churches, an international denomination that ministers to the LGBT community and its allies.

Pansexual: A word used to describe a person who participates in (or is open to) sexual activities of many kinds. In BDSM, this is a term used to describe a person with sexual or activity preferences with all genders and orientations, or an organization or community that caters to all orientations, genders, activities.

Play: The term often used by BDSM practitioners to refer to what they do together. BDSM activity is called "play," and the implements used are often referred to as "toys" on the West Coast, and often as "tools" on the East Coast of the United States.

Polyamory: The practice or lived experience of being engaged in loving, sexual, and open relationships with more than one person at a time. To be polyamorous is to be someone who is open to and who engages in being in love and in both an emotional and sexual relationship with more than one person at a time.

Polyspiritual: The lived experience of being engaged with the practices, rituals, and beliefs of more than one faith tradition at a time.

Queer: The traditional definition of this word is "something that deviates from the norm." It has also been used as a derogatory term for those who are physically and emotionally attracted to others of the same gender. I will use this term in the way we use it at MCCSF – as a word we have proudly reclaimed to describe those of us who, with our lives, color outside the lines of much that is considered "the norm" in our society, including gender expression, sexual orientation, theological beliefs, and sexual practice.

Sex: Specific sexual practices and acts. I will differentiate between the two in my work because we often use the words "sexuality" and "sex" synonymously in The Church, which enables us to avoid actually talking about what we do with our bodies in the practice of our sexuality.

Sexuality: That which pertains to our sexual attractions, desires, and energy. This word is most often used to describe sexual orientation as related to gender, but can also be used to describe one's sexual orientation as related to practice, i.e. BDSM, "vanilla," celibacy, polyamory, etc.

SM: Abbreviation for sadomasochism, which refers to the practice of deriving pleasure from either inflicting pain or receiving pain (usually) in a sexual context. Because the term sadomasochism has a clinical ring to it and has often been used to pathologize those who enjoy such practices, "SM" is the preferred term used by the leather community. SM is also often used as an umbrella term that incorporates Ds (see above).

Spirit: The passion and longing within us that connects us with the Divine, however we name that Being. The life-force within us that we often express through religious means. It can be expressed through physical and sexual means as well, which can also be a religious experience.

Spirituality: That which pertains to our spiritual attractions, desires, and energy. This word is sometimes used to refer to one's spiritual orientation, i.e. Christian, Buddhist, etc., but can also be used to describe one's spiritual orientation as related to practice, i.e. meditation, prayer, etc. Spirituality transcends religion, religious institutions, and religious teachings.

Womanism/womanist: As described by Alice Walker, "womanism is to feminism what purple is to lavender." The belief in the abilities, potential, and freedom of women beyond boundaries of race and/or class. One who follows and advocates for the ideals of womanism.

Vanilla: A sometimes slightly pejorative word to refer to those who prefer to keep BDSM out of their sexual play. I will not be using this word pejoratively, but simply as a description of sex that does not involve elements of BDSM.

Appendix 2: Interviews

Interview with "Philip" by Instant Messenger, August 7, 2009

Lea: Good morning, Philip - I'm ready when you are

Philip: You all bright eyed and bushy tailed?

Lea: Absolutely - I have been watching the full moon slowly sinking into the ocean - what could make one more bushy-tailed? Ok...I can think of a few things. How about you?

Philip: Sounds pretty wonderful. I got up just as the sky was thinking about beginning to lighten...and there's no fog! Gorgeous.

Lea: I know -I'm thrilled. When we are finished I am taking my pup to Fort Funston - perfect day for it.

Speaking of which, we should get started...I have quite a few questions. Feeling ready?
Philip: Ready as I will ever be.

Lea: Ok...here we go...

First of all, thank you for being my first guinea pig. I have a long list of questions, and I'm not sure if everyone will be answering all of these, or if I'll figure out there are others I need to ask, but you are the lucky person who I get to try this on first. Thank you for that
.
Philip: my pleasure...I think

Lea: First question: would you like me to use a pseudonym? If so, do you have a favorite?

Philip: Pseudonym is cool. Whatever works for you.

Lea: Ok...will do. I'll resist the temptation to use a drag queen name.

Second question....how do you identify? Gender, race, ethnicity, religion, sexual orientation, class, age, SM orientation, gender expression, physical dis/ability? Did I leave anything out?

Philip: Bio male, genderqueer, able bodied but short, North American mutt, working class but overeducated in a low paying field, fairly pansexual in theory but have only had "real" sex with men, 43 years old, SM bottom mostly, but have really enjoyed topping.

Gender expression is an interesting one for me. If I didn't have such an obviously male, thick stocky body, I would probably gender express differently. As it is, I love opportunities to dress up a little. I've been thinking about getting a black corset. One of my strongest SM fantasies...and this is a crazy one...came up with one particular playmate about two years ago. He wanted me to wear panties…Anyway, that started a very interesting year or so of exploring gender a little more deeply.

Lea: Awesome! Next question...do you have a preferred name for God or whatever you think of as God?

Philip: probably the name I use most often for god is eternal spirit. My theology is very process oriented. I've been getting into Ken Wilber lately, thanks to my spiritual mentor.

Lea: Ok...that is the name I will use throughout this interview. What is your religious background? Did you grow up in a certain faith tradition?

Philip: Roman Catholic

Lea: How did you come to be a UU?

Philip: I was confirmed Roman Catholic at age 17, already very sexually active, with my first partner (of 8 years) and feeling very, very unwelcome in the church, despite the fact that I had felt a calling as a kid. So, I stayed away from the "homophobic, patriarchal, oppressive, misogynistic church for about 18 years. Until things got so bad in my life that I found myself standing in front of the mirror with a handful of Reprobamate feeling completely isolated. It took a while of therapy to realize that what I was missing was spirit in my life. And diversity. So, I remembered in college reading about how Unitarianism was such a huge influence on one of my heroes, Frank Lloyd Wright, and how much it appealed to me then. I checked out the local UU church...and within three years I was in seminary.

Lea: Wow....I had a somewhat similar story with therapy as well. I make jokes about it a lot, but thank God for therapy.

Philip: You said a mouthful

Lea: But...back to RC...what did it teach you, or - what teaching lived inside of you the most - about the nature of eternal spirit?

Philip: Wow. RC taught me that it's not possible to have a direct relationship with the eternal spirit, that it can only happen through a mediator...a priest. That I wasn't smart enough to get it. That I shouldn't ask too many questions. I had to unlearn all of that. Now, I know that we all have the capacity, even the responsibility to tap into our relationship with the divine, with the eternal being, the source of all creation, because we

are part of that creation. We are co-creators. I know many Catholics feel that way, but that was not the message I got from any Catholics until I started seminary and started hanging out with all of the really cool RC nuns and priests I now know.

Lea: Ok...Just wanted to mention here that I am going to resist the urge to comment on your answers....because I know we could go into a long dialogue on every one (which I would love to do)...don't want to keep you all morning. But I am loving reading your answers.

Lea: So...next question...just a little one really....what did RC teach you about sexuality?

Philip: One word. Bad.

Lea: And that sums it up, folks. I understand.

Philip: Plus, queers are perverts going to hell.

Lea: Yep. So...who/what is eternal spirit to you at this point in your life?

Philip: The energy that unites all matter, all being, all creation. You know all that stuff that science can't explain? Like how the first living cells were animated out of the primordial ooze? Like what keeps atoms together? Like what exactly is it that the universe is expanding into? I need to think of that as being the eternal spirit, not chaos. I think the eternal spirit is the glue that holds the universe together, keeps it from flying apart.

Lea: How did you come to this understanding?

Philip: Reading, study, meditation, reflection on the relationships in my life. Mainly discovering that there were other people who share what I have always thought. It was a revelation for me to discover process theology. I got it instantly.

Lea: What is spirituality to you?

Philip: Intentionally tapping into my relationship with the divine, my place in the universe, seeing my own tininess and vastness in relationship to the everything. I don't see a huge difference between religion and spirituality, because it is all about connectedness, relationships. You can't become spiritual alone, and once you start connecting with like-minded, supportive people, all the "bad" stuff associated with religion starts to happen. Creeds, dogma. Even in UU, where we have no official creeds or dogma, they still exist, loosely, defined by the power brokers in each autonomous congregation.

Lea: Ok...now on to the really fun questions...Does your sexuality feel like a spiritual part of you? If so, how?

Philip: At its best it does. When I am really connected to someone who is without inhibitions and can let it be what it will be, allowing the creative force to be a uniting factor, instead of a point of judgment and division. When someone introduces me to a turn on that is new for me, and I can just be present to that, grooving in it, I can learn something entirely new about myself and my place in the universe. It's the coolest thing to get to do that for someone else, too. The best is when we discover this stuff together. Girth. Spanking. Leather. Panties. Pits. Piercing. Butt plugs. All great discoveries.

Lea: Absolutely. What is prayer to you?

Philip: Prayer is tapping onto the energy that unites us. Taking my rightful place as a co-creator of the universe, of reality as we know it. Deepening my consciousness with intentionality. Calling into my presence the spirit of the universe, and the spirits of other people in my life. Holding in my heart, in a healing way, people who need a little bit more to get them through the suffering. Celebrating with people from a distance. Reflecting on how to deepen my consciousness. Thankfulness.

Lea: What is SM to you?

Philip: Faith. Faith in another person. Trusting that we can explore together the intersection of creation and destruction through the infliction of pleasure and pain. Faith in healing. Faith in the presence of the divine. Faith in myself, and my ability to control myself when I'm topping, to be sensitive enough to know when to stop and when to go deeper. Faith that the person topping me will have the same kind of sensitivity. Prayer and spanking aren't much different, when they're done well.

Lea: You're doing great! Next question- do you pray with your body? If so, do you pray with your body through SM?

Philip: No, sadly. It's something I am working on. At least on a regular daily basis. My SM encounters are too few and far between, but I will say that when I have them, they can be very prayerful.

Lea: Can you say more about how they feel prayerful when it happens?

Philip: It's more than just "oh god, oh god!" Prayer, like I said, is partly about tapping into my own power as a co-creator of the universe and of destiny. We all have that, like it or not, in that we affect one another. In regular waking life, we are often very disconnected by that, even willfully resistant to that power and responsibility. I know I can be. But when I make the effort to be present to that power, I go deeper into my place in the universe. I discover anew each time the power of humility.

Lea: Ok...moving on...Is SM a connector for you between your queer self and your spiritual self? If so, how? (Maybe this question feels too much like the question about prayer.)

Philip: Yeah, I guess it is. Though, not the only connector.

Lea: Are there other spiritual/sexual-type connectors?

Philip: To me faith and action are so intertwined, that political activism may have a great role as connector. Maybe if I actually had more sex than I do it would be different!

Lea: Amen to that! I find it supremely ironic that here I am, doing all this work on sexuality and spirituality, and do I ever actually have enough time or energy for sex - no! How wrong is that? But I digress...Have you had/do you currently have experiences of God becoming flesh for you in some way with SM? If so, how?

Philip: Let me clarify the last one. The connection between spirituality and queerness is more political. The connection between spirituality and sex is BDSM and a bunch of other stuff: group scenes, sexual play that doesn't involve pain, costumes or fetish, fetish itself, gender play....a lot of things. God becoming flesh...

Lea: Got it. I guess I should insert a question here that I didn't think to ask earlier....when you are done with the God becoming flesh question, want to say a little bit about what SM and/or Ds is to you?

Philip: Yes. I have a friend for whom the image of the crucified Christ is a big part of his interest in SM, and I have another friend whose daughter was murdered, who finds an affinity with Mary. It's not that theological or doctrinal for me. For me, it's much more about deeper connectedness. Where there is much connection that goes beyond the flesh, we are all incarnating the eternal spirit, living into our fullness.
I don't know where to start with defining SM/BD/DS! I've given theology more thought! But let's see...

Lea: It doesn't have to be extensive...just what you think for yourself personally is fine. Although that can certainly be extensive, which is fine too.

Philip: I'm much more into D/S than S/M. Don't get me wrong, I love a good spanking. I love going into the pain, the subtle exchange of energy that can come from the pain, but I have no interest in hardcore stuff, especially anything that can lead to bloodshed. For me the dominance is the turn on. Somebody wanting me enough to want to own me, yet love me enough to take care of me unconditionally is the fantasy, as un- PC as that sounds.

Lea: Are you kidding? I love that fantasy!

Philip: Playfulness is very important to me. Spanking seems playful in a way. I never want to cross the line into violence. At least not physical violence.

Lea: A minister I know said something once that I totally understand...just because I'm a feminist doesn't mean I want to be one in bed.

Philip: Yeah...I mean 60-70 hours a week I have to be "on" I have to be the minister, all sensitive and correct. Nothing can be about me. Hell, I just love being in the middle of a huge group of men, all naked, having fun. I love to be the pig.

Lea: Too bad they never talk about that kind of self-care in seminary.
What did your Ds play with him (or with others) teach you/reveal about your own spirituality, and about the nature of God?

Philip: Well, a cornerstone of my theology is that god lives in the apparent paradoxes. That when we get closer by fighting, that's grace...that's where god lives. That we grow stronger through loss and grieving. That we can love more deeply though hurting one another. That kind of thing. Actually playing out the d/s scenes reinforced what I already knew about the way god lives thorough us and in our lives.

Lea: Hmmm...very interesting. I've never heard that description - I love it. Those paradoxes are so true.

How does Ds/SM make you feel about your own body....in scene, and out of scene out in the world?

Philip: There is something there too about god wanting us to do the difficult, the outrageous, the things we fear the most. Think about how gross it is that Jesus told his disciples that they were eating his flesh! And people STILL do it. Doing the outrageous things makes me test my own commitment, my own strength, my own connections.

Lea: Absolutely...and God knows we need that kind of outrageous strength and commitment for daily ministry.

Philip: I've actually grown to love my body more through the outrageous scenes. I love that I can make it smooth and hairless. That I can look very femme and curvy if I want. That I can gain a little weight, get very furry and be a bear fantasy. That someone can ask me to or even make me change myself in order to fulfill a fantasy. There's a great confidence that comes from knowing that I can control so much and surrender to so much. In Islam, it's all about surrender, one of the things that really appeals to me about that tradition. The surrender simultaneously gives me incredible power and relieves me of, I don't know...what's the word I'm looking for...surrender relieves me having to be responsible for everything.

Lea: And isn't there a wonderful feeling of peace in that?

Philip: There is!

Lea: Ok...just four more questions to go.... I am writing a paper for a class called "Unleashing Our Voices" that dealt a fair amount with singing. This may seem like an odd question, but, does Ds/SM make your heart sing? I am guessing from what you have said already that the answer is "yes." If so, I am interested in hearing a little more about what that feels like.

Philip: I am a terrible singer. At least, that's what I have always told myself. But the surrender I think would make me very happy to sing if I were forced to. Plus, there's such a confidence that I have gained in the play that I find myself actually felling more inclined in general to sing! Not just at church. A few weeks ago, there were only two of us singing happy birthday to my partner. I put on this very loud almost silly voice that I projected with so much confidence. It was very deep, cartoonishly deep. The other two people were amazed, saying "I didn't know you could sing like that!" I find that I throw into it the same kind of shameless abandon that I can throw into getting my ass paddled or wearing pantyhose and daisy duke's to a leather bar. It's very empowering.

Lea: That's great....there are certainly all kind of ways that our hearts (and other parts of us) can sing! What do you most wish that religious people (clergy and lay people) knew about SM and Ds who are not practitioners themselves?

Philip: Joyful abandon. Trust. Playfulness. That there is a gender continuum. That god lives in everything we do. Even the scary stuff. Especially the scary stuff.

Lea: What do you most wish they knew about the relationship of SM/Ds to your spirituality and to your connection with God?

Philip: That there's a difference between humility and humiliation. If we have humility, cultivated through D/S play, we can't be humiliated. How powerful is that? That's how we gain Christ consciousness! Getting so big from our smallness. Nirvana. Pure being. Call it what you will.

Lea: It's unbelievably powerful.

Philip: Amen!

Lea: Ok...last question...more of a housekeeping one....since you are my first interviewee, how did this feel? Too many questions? Not enough? Anything feel redundant?

Philip: This actually was a helluva lot of fun. I don't get a chance to talk about this kind of thing hardly ever.

Lea: I understand.....me too.

Philip: I'm thinking that I want to tell my partner about it and open up some more conversation, about things that have been sort of hard to talk about.

Lea: Great!

Philip: I completely expected that there would be tough questions. If I were ashamed or afraid, or uncomfortable, I would not have agreed.

Lea: Well, I can't tell you how much I appreciate your willingness to say yes, and for your vulnerability. Thank you!

Philip: My pleasure. Glad I can help one person's efforts to demystify kink.

Lea: Well, hopefully what I come up with will help a lot.

Philip: Thanks, It's been fun. Talk to you soon!

Lea: Thank you again, Philip! Absolutely - more soon.

Notes from Phone Interview with "Jasmine," August 10, 2009

Lea: How do you identify? (Gender, race, ethnicity, religion, sexual orientation, class, age, SM orientation, physical dis/ability, etc.)?

Jasmine: Female, caucasian, spirituality undefined (does not identify as Christian, but feels connected to it), lesbian, middle-class (grew up upper middle-class), 67, switch, reasonably able-bodied, non-monogamous married.

Lea: Do you have a preferred name for God?

Jasmine: Spirit.

Lea: What is your religious background? Did you grow up in a certain faith tradition?

Jasmine: I grew up Catholic, left Catholic church after I came out as a lesbian at 40. As an adult I belonged to a very left-wing, politically very radical Catholic community. Didn't do much with church between the ages of 40 and 50. Started looking for a new church community around 50 and tried the Episcopal church for awhile, then found MCCSF, which felt like home.

Lea: What did this tradition teach you the most about the nature of God/the Divine?

Jasmine: That God is all-knowing, all-powerful, and was the creator and Father of us all.

Lea: What did it teach you about the nature of your relationship with God /the Divine?
Jasmine: That God made me to know him, to love him, to serve him in this world, and to be happy with him in the next.

Lea: What did it teach you about sexuality?

Jasmine: I learned a lot about impurity, and impure thoughts, and as a teenager I was taught that impure thoughts were a mortal sin, just as much as impure actions. The definition of impure seemed kind of general to me – like anything remotely sexual outside the context of marriage.

Lea: Who/what is Spirit to you at this point in your life?

Jasmine: Spirit is an energy that exists in the world and in beings, and particularly in people. Divine Spirit is manifested through people and in nature, and through ourselves when we are able to access the highest parts of ourselves.

Lea: How did you come to this understanding?

Jasmine: I don't know the exact answer – it has just been a process of evolution for me through my own searching and questioning.

Lea: What is spirituality to you?

Jasmine: To me spirituality is kind of an individual thing – it has to do with my own personal process and rituals and the ways I connect with divinity within me and nature and others. Religion is a structure in which ritual and celebration and community can happen. Religion at its best can provide a group manifestation and communal experience of the divine.

Lea: Does your sexuality feel like a spiritual part of you? If so, how?

Jasmine: Yes, it does feel like a spiritual part of me. It feels like another opportunity to be connected to love, and to universal love. It feels like a God-given gift that is meant to be used and celebrated and shared. Queer sexuality just adds frosting to the cake. (Queer sexuality is sexuality that is outside of the mainstream, along with LGBT sexuality.)

Lea: What is prayer to you?

Jasmine: Prayer is a tool through which I am able to reflect about what matters to me, what is troubling me, what is pleasing to me. It is a tool for taking time to be present with those experiences, emotions and needs in my life.

Lea: What is SM to you?

Jasmine: SM is also a tool for me to connect more deeply to my body experiences, to others and the bodies of others, and to Spirit, often in an altered state. It can also mean community.

Lea: Do you pray with your body? If so, do you pray with your body and/or through SM? Through vanilla sex?

Jasmine: I don't think I consciously pray with my body or through sex (vanilla or SM). However, I think the experiences of any kind of sex, or other sensual (but not sexual) experiences in my body can sometimes feel prayerful, but that is not my conscience intent.

Lea: What does it feel like when you do this?

Jasmine: It feels like a deeper connection with my self, with my body, with love, and with other human beings. It feels like a celebration of bodies and gifts of sexuality and therefore a connection to something greater than my everyday self. Sex and SM have certainly at times put me in an altered state which feels spiritual.

Lea: Is SM a connector for you between your queer self and your spiritual self? If so, how?

Jasmine: To some extent, but I'm not quite sure how it has happened, since I have been developing all of these parts of myself at the same time – my queer self, my sexual self, my SM self, my queer sexual self, etc.

Lea: Does Spirit become flesh for you in SM? Different with vanilla sex? If so, how?

Jasmine: I don't think I would articulate my experience in that way. Spirit is present in the room and in the connections, but how that happens – I don't know. I do find that I connect with the sacredness of my body and that of my partners during SM and vanilla sex. Taking the time in loving and conscience connection with other bodies is something we don't do much of in everyday life. I also have more sense of my body as sacred when I am intentional about being with and touching my body outside of sex.

Lea: What has your experience of spirituality through SM or vanilla sex taught you about the nature of Spirit?

Jasmine: It accentuates what I already believed about Spirit being most available in and through bodies and in and through human connection and especially in loving human connection. My experience of SM is especially an experience of presence; my mind is rarely able to be anywhere else except where I am during SM. In much of the rest of my life, even when I am with other people, the chatter in my head comes up frequently and distracts me from absolute presence with another person. SM has been a wonderful experience of being totally in the moment with my body and with the person I am with, which I think is an experience of Spirit.

Lea: How does SM make you feel about your body?

Jasmine: Appreciative, mystified sometimes, amazed, thankful, and very happy to have a body.

Lea: How does this relate to/affect your relationship to your body?

Jasmine: I think over the last few years I have developed an acceptance of my body that is far greater than it used to be. It has helped me try to honor my body and treat it well more of the time, and enjoy the body that I have.

Lea: How does this relate to your spirituality?

Jasmine: Being a part of MCCSF, a spiritual community that honors and celebrates the connection between body and spirit and sees spirituality as something that should be embodied – this has brought me great joy. It has helped me to be a more integrated

person.

Lea: How does power exchange feel erotic to you?

Jasmine: Surrender is erotic to me, whether I am topping or bottoming. That is one piece of it – an important piece. In the negotiated agreements about power exchange, and in the willingness/choice to be vulnerable in that exchange, there is something that opens up possibilities erotically and with all kinds of sensations.

Lea: How does this eroticism connect to your own power, and to your spiritual power?
Jasmine: The choice to surrender or to take control in a particular situation gives me an enormous opportunity to stretch my own boundaries and knowledge of myself and others, which then spills over into other areas of my life where power and spirit can show up. I think when I have been involved in a power exchange situation in an intentional and chosen way, I inevitably come away from the experience with a great sense of freedom. This creates more power in life.

Lea: What do you most wish religious people knew about SM?

Jasmine: I wish they understood the strength and possibilities for growth, for love, for connections with Spirit that can exist for people using SM in their lives. I wish they (religious or not) understood that it is not about abuse or about hurting people…that the paradox of power that exists in choosing to participate in what seems like a powerless position actually provides such great opportunities. I wish that really religious folks would look back at religion through the ages and realize the places where SM played a part.

Lea: What do you most wish they knew about the relationship of SM to your spirituality and your connection with Spirit?

Jasmine: That it is another quite amazing way for me to be in loving connection with others and with the Divine. It has been for me a somewhat unexpected gift, having come out into SM around the age of 57. It has helped me to discover a lot more about who I am as a spiritual being, as a perfect expression of God's love in the world. It has been very interesting for me to meet so many people for whom SM is such an essential part of their life – it's their church in a way. I've been very touched by the people I've met and the ways they live with authenticity and love in the world with SM being a core part of how they walk in the world.

Notes from Phone Interview with "Cheri," September 19, 2009

Lea: How do you identify? (Gender, race, ethnicity, religion, sexual orientation, class, age, SM orientation, physical dis/ability, etc.)?

Cheri: African American, lesbian, middle class, able-bodied, age 53, spiritual.

Lea: Do you have a preferred name for God?

Cheri: God.

Lea: What is your religious background? Did you grow up in a certain faith tradition?

Cheri: I grew up Baptist in a predominantly African American church.

Lea: What did this tradition teach you the most about the nature of God?

Cheri: That we are sinners and that it was only through baptism and constant practice that we could be forgiven and go to heaven. Jesus died for our sins.

Lea: What did it teach you about the nature of your relationship with God?

Cheri: That my lifestyle didn't fit with this; I was going to be in a state of perpetual sinning if I wanted to be true to myself. I didn't think I could have a true relationship with that God, so I felt very disconnected from God and isolated from the spiritual experiences that other people were having. The only connection that I felt was through the music.

Lea: What did it teach you about sexuality?

Cheri: I never heard any message about sex. The only thing I remember is that once a man and woman were married, they could have children. There wasn't any message at all for anyone who wasn't married or who didn't want to be married, or for someone like me – I just heard it was a sin.

Lea: Who/what is God to you at this point in your life?

Cheri: To me, God is everything. I don't really refer to God as God because I think God is a nameless, faceless energy that resides in me and you and everyone and everything, which is why we are all connected.

Lea: How did you come to this understanding?

Cheri: I came to this through my relationships with other women, my intimate relationships with women, and through being a member of a church (like MCC) where my experience is validated. I first came to MCC in the late 80s, and for some reason I stopped coming. I came back in the late 90s or early 2000s, and the day I came back Rev. Tessie Mandeville was preaching. The message was about inclusiveness and that gay people are loved by God, and that MCC is the place we can come to experience our connection with God. I cried through the whole service, and at communion I was in Tessie's line, and she remembered my name. Whatever she said in my communion blessing – it was right then that my relationship with God changed.

Lea: What is spirituality to you?

Cheri: Spirituality is the connection between people and things, and it is my connection to myself. The more deeply we allow ourselves to experience every aspect of ourselves, that is how much more deeply we can experience those things in other people. This is how we can understand ourselves – by understanding these things in ourselves and in other beings.

Lea: Does your sexuality feel like a spiritual part of you? If so, how?

Cheri: It absolutely does, and the addendum to this answer is "only recently." I was sexually molested as an infant, so I feel like my sexuality has always been repressed. It has been very hard for me to receive, even though I can be a fantastic lover for others. My ability to receive love from someone else I know will bring me a deeper awareness of myself and the person I am with, and deeper spiritual connection – prior to this sexuality felt primarily like a physical connection only. Prior to the last year or so I would never have called it a spiritual connection.

Lea: What is prayer to you?

Cheri: Prayer is anything that allows us to go deep. For me specifically that could be yoga, bicycle riding, talking intimately with my partner, closing my eyes with the intent of being in connection with that deep place within myself, it is connecting with other people, enjoying food in a deep way, working out. The goal is to offer gratitude, and every time I get deeply into anything, that is prayer.

Lea: Do you pray with your body? If so, do you pray with your body and/or through SM? Through vanilla sex?

Cheri: Definitely, see above.

Lea: What does it feel like when you do this?

Cheri: It feels glorious, especially when I allow myself to really go to that deep place. It is incredibly rewarding, I feel happy, I feel like I am pursuing my essential purpose.
Lea: Is sex a connector for you between your queer self and your spiritual self? If so, how?

Cheri: Recently, for the reasons I mentioned earlier. I am extremely grateful for the awareness I have now around this, through my connections to MCC, the work you (Lea) are doing, and through my partner now.

Lea: Does God become flesh for you in sex? If so, how?

Cheri: Absolutely – I am still learning how to make this happen, because I still have some inhibitions around it. Sometimes I'll go to a certain level and then need to pull back because of fear. But my partner supports me in whatever I need to do, and that trust that I have in her because of her support is invaluable to my process of allowing my body to be spiritual vessel. It feels like God becomes flesh in my body, and in the two of us together. It's my body, and her body, and God's body – the Trinity!

Lea: What has your experience of spirituality through sex taught you about the nature of God?

Cheri: That God is expansive and limitless and powerful and awesome. That God is caring and supportive, and that everything is possible.

Lea: How does sex as it is for you now make you feel about your body?

Cheri: I feel really strong in my body, and when my partner and I are together sexually I feel like the boundary that is my body becomes like an amoeba – it allows energy in and the energy I have seeps into her. It is kind of a shifting energetic flow that I don't get in any other part of my life. It feels like a circle of energy that can flow through and into and out of and around us. It feels like a cosmic experience.

Lea: How does this relate to/affect your relationship to your body?

Cheri: They only enhance it, especially as I am getting older, as I am getting even more connected to my body than ever before. I feel even more grounded, more centered, and in a place where I can offer more to other people. I feel whole.

Lea: How does this relate to your spirituality?

Cheri: That expansiveness feels like the ability to reach out – the spiritual connection comes from feeling whole and having the ability to reach out.

Lea: What do you most wish religious people knew about what sexuality is for you in your life?

Cheri: My answer is based mostly on my experiences with my family members, who are very religious. A couple of them are very supportive of who I am. I can talk about my partner with them, and about where I am with her. My mother is very homophobic – she has never met any of my partners and I have never been able to talk with her about them. All of these factors influence my answer to this question.

I wish most religious people understood that what is important is having a connection with other people, whether you decide you want one partner, or three partners, a man, a woman, a transgender person – it's all about connection. Whatever consensual connection people have with each other is good – I wish they could accept whatever the connection is, even if that is not what they want for themselves – that they would accept it as righteous.

Lea: What do you most wish they knew about the relationship of your spirituality and your connection with God?

Cheri: I wish they understood that that connection enhances the energy of the entire Universe ; and I wish they understood that whatever connection they decide to have does the same thing. And also that their lack of acceptance affects the universal energy too. Every time I have conversations like this it just reinforces the fact that I am in the place I should be in and that I am on the right track. I am grateful for every opportunity to delve into this issue.

Notes from Phone Interview with Marilyn Hollinger, August 17, 2009

Lea: How do you identify? (Gender, race, ethnicity, religion, sexual orientation, class, age, SM orientation, physical dis/ability, etc.)?

Marilyn: White, Jewish, female, lesbian, Femme, fat, middle/upper middle class, 46, Top, mostly able bodied, liberal

Lea: Do you have a preferred name for God?

Marilyn: God is fine.

Lea: What is your religious background? Did you grow up in a certain faith tradition?

Marilyn: I grew up conservative Jewish. We went to synagogue periodically. We did Sabbath prayers most weeks, although we didn't observe Sabbath as a day of rest. My first cousins all went through their bar and bat mitzvah services, but I did not. I had a few years of religious education – Judaica (learning about Jewish history, people and faith), but not Hebrew.

Lea: What did this tradition teach you the most about the nature of God?

Marilyn: Not a lot – there wasn't a lot of discussion about God. Mostly about culture, tradition, the history of Jewish people and Israel. There wasn't a lot of God talk, not from my parents, grandparents, or synagogue. Mostly about culture, food, tradition, observing holidays, being together as a family. We learned prayers in English. I didn't grow up feeling deeply religious, but I did feel connected to Jewish culture. Not a lot of discussion or emphasis on faith. I didn't exactly direct prayers to God.

Lea: What did it teach you about the nature of your relationship with God?

Marilyn: It taught me that God was kind of a wise old man, a being, who taught you things. I always associated God with justice and fairness. My family was big on fairness, and I always felt like that came from God.

Lea: What did it teach you about sexuality?

Marilyn: Nothing. I have no memory of anything negative either, but there was just nothing.

Lea: Who/what is God to you at this point in your life?

Marilyn: As I have grown up I experience God more existentially, more as a consciousness. I feel like I am experiencing God when I am in the presence of joy, and

when good is being done. It is more an experience of a collective consciousness. I think we get wisdom from this consciousness.

Lea: How did you come to this understanding?

Marilyn: It was very internal. Whenever I was in the presence of joy, good being done, understanding, support - it made me feel connected to something bigger than myself, and I thought, "that has to be God."

Lea: What is spirituality to you?

Marilyn: Spirituality is about seeking that connection. It's about finding ways to get to that place, whether that be through sex, by holding a baby, through spending joyous time with a friend or family, or sitting outside smelling trees. These are all very spiritual things to me, and they all give me a taste of that feeling of what I feel is God.

Lea: Does your sexuality feel like a spiritual part of you? If so, how?

Marilyn: Absolutely – yes. My sexuality is a way that I connect with a lot of different things that I consider spiritual, like sharing joy with another person, being very authentic, feeling deep pleasure while my partner is too. Helping another person feel intense sexual pleasure is spiritual for me; helping other face fear. Orgasm takes me completely into embodied bliss, and explosive joy that is too big to be contained just in my body. It's like I am everywhere all at once – it is more than my body. That is the same feeling that I have when I have a very intense spiritual experience of other kinds – I just can't contain it – the act of getting to that place is a spiritual journey, and my sexuality can take me to that place in lots of different ways.

Lea: What is SM to you?

Marilyn: SM is mostly physical to me. BDSM includes mental and emotional aspects too. BDSM to me is playing with power – using power dynamics (physical, mental, emotional) to just have fun, and to go on those spiritual journeys. It's play, it's a hobby, and I take it very seriously. It is a huge part of both my recreation and my spirituality.

Lea: Do you pray with your body? If so, do you pray with your body and/or through SM? Through vanilla sex?

Marilyn: I don't think of anything that I do as prayer…even when I read the Torah or go to temple, I don't think of it as prayer as much as learning or seeking.

Lea: Is SM a connector for you between your queer self and your spiritual self? If so, how?

Marilyn: I don't separate my queer self from the rest of myself. I would say more that it is a way to exercise my spiritual self.

Lea: What has your experience of spirituality through SM or vanilla sex taught you about the nature of God?

Marilyn: Not that I grew up thinking sex is bad in God's eyes, but they have absolutely convinced me that sex is an absolutely right and joyous thing. It is the ultimate way to connect with God. But if you are not honest about what you do sexually, it is also the best way to experience the exact opposite – depression, self-hatred, and resentment.

Lea: How does SM make you feel about your body?

Marilyn: Doing SM makes me feel strong. The fact that there are people who find joy in doing SM with me makes me feel sexy, and very good about my body. SM is a vehicle for that kind of connection, and that helps my body image.

Lea: How does this relate to/affect your relationship to your body?

Marilyn: SM is a way I have joyous sex. Joyous sex helps to validate that my body isn't wrong…it has helped me accept my body with its limitations. It's not the SM itself…it's the sexual experience that happens to be SM. Vanilla sex also has the same effect. The thing I get specifically from SM is the feeling of being strong and resilient and creative. This makes me feel good about my body.

Lea: How does this relate to your spirituality?

Marilyn: In the same way I described that sex must be good…in the same way my body must be good. It allows me to have enough strength to push away the messages about how ugly my fat body is. This allows me to be more spiritual; I'm not grounded in negativity . If I am grounded in negativity or depression or self-hatred, I can't get to those joyous places. So having positive feelings about my body allows me to be more spiritual.

Lea: How does power exchange feel erotic to you?

Marilyn: It feels erotic in a couple of ways. Mentally, the trust that somebody puts in me makes me feel good about myself and my psyche, and that's just sexy and fun. I think having fun on many levels is an erotic experience. Being trusted and respected, and having someone give themselves to me is a profoundly pleasurable thing. Part of my power is about control; when I play as a Top, I have complete control over someone else's actions to give me pleasure. So I don't know if it is the power itself that gives me pleasure, or the ability to get exactly what I want sexually. The power is a way for me to get exactly what I want sexually without feeling like I am being selfish or exploiting

someone. When someone gives me the freedom to do that, I don't feel selfish or like I am exploiting them.

Lea: How does this eroticism connect to your own power, and to your spiritual power?
Marilyn: Anything erotic is spiritual to me, because it increases that feeling of joy that I consider spiritual. Anything that is a turn-on to me is spiritual. The intense eroticism I get from play is also an intense spiritual feeling and journey.

Lea: What do you most wish religious people knew about SM?

Marilyn: First, I wish they knew that sexuality is part of God. That it is a good, positive, spiritual thing that helps you be closer to God. It isn't bad. What I wish everyone knew about SM is that it is not harmful; it is very loving and nurturing and trusting, and it can also bring you closer to God because of the intense joy. I think people can be closer to God through intense joy, and that most people never experience this kind of joy. I think most people never experience the kind of intense joy I feel when I play.

Interview with "M. Saraswati" by Instant Messenger, August 18, 2009

Lea: So....first question....can you tell me all the ways you identify by gender expression, race and/or ethnicity, sexual orientation, class, SM orientation, age, dis/ability?

M.: Hmm...let's see...ok...gender expression/sexual orientation: queer femme dyke lesbian. Race/ethnicity: South Asian or Indo-American person of color, etc., age 38, middle class, not disabled, bottom / grrl. I think that's it.

Lea: Yep..that's everything, unless there is any else you would like to add.

M.: No, that seems like plenty.

Lea: Lol...true. Thank you...next question...do you have a preferred name for God/the Divine?

M.: Not really, no. I think all the names are ok. We can call it the Divine for today.

Lea: Ok...will do. What is your religious background? Did you grow up in a certain tradition (some of these questions I already know the answer to because I know, but need to ask for the interview.)

M.: I grew up Hindu, but mildly so. My parents didn't pray at home every day or go to temple a lot, mainly because we didn't live near a temple. But they did believe and we celebrated some of the holy days and they tried to impart the basic principles of karma, dharma, etc. as well as who the important gods & goddesses were. To me they were mostly interesting stories rather than actually deities that I believed in. As an adult I started practicing meditation at a Soto (Japanese-style) Zen Center. I've practiced with a few different styles of Buddhist meditation and I also do yoga, which has a spiritual component, and I suppose there is a kind of mystic/ecstatic side to my spirituality, along the lines of Hafiz and Rumi and some of the Indian Tantric ideas. Starting in my 20s I also did some study of feminist spiritualities, reading people like Gloria Anzaldua, Luisah Teish, Starhawk.

Lea: I love Luisa Teish! What did the tradition you grew up in (and the way that tradition was practiced in your family) teach you about the nature of the Divine?

M.: In one way I feel like it didn't teach me much because I didn't really have much of a sense of faith or awe or belief as a child, at least not in the traditional Hindu ideas and deities. But then on the other hand, I feel grateful not to have grown up with a very strong moralistic point of view or a Judeo-Christian worldview that involved a lot of a guilt, the idea of sin, etc. because I see people I know struggle with that legacy.

I do believe in karma now but not exactly in the Hindu way, more in a sort of Buddhist psychology way; but I think being raised with the concept made me more open to it and allowed me to have a foundation that has evolved with time. I mean I think of karma as just sort of commonsense, law of cause and effect. And I do feel a connection to some of the Hindu deities now, although I feel like I've made my own way to that and it's not exactly the way it was taught to me as a child. But maybe that's true of everyone ... child vs. adult view of spirituality.

Lea: Wow...you are the first non-monotheist I have interviewed...which makes your answers very different, and very interesting. Next question...What did growing up Hindu teach you about sexuality?

M.: Hmm…I don't remember ever discussing it. It didn't come up either good or bad. At some point I heard about the Kama Sutra but that was much later, I was probably in college or at least high school, and I didn't read it until I was about 25 or 30, so it wasn't formative or anything. Just curious. I was already out by then. There are some Hindu myths & stories that involve overt sexuality but they are kind of made G-rated for the versions told to kids, so I didn't learn about those until later. So I guess what I learned was a lot of silence...One thing, though, was that a lot of Hindus believe if you have your period you can't go into the temple or be part of a ritual or go into a house where a wedding is taking place. I remember that my parents didn't really believe that but they knew other people did, so when I had my period and we were at a family wedding or something, my mother would just tell me not to tell anybody. I think the lesson to me was, you don't have to play by all the rules just because someone says that's what the religion is. There's room for disagreement.

Lea: That's great...excellent lesson. My next question is this: "Who/what is the divine to you today in your life," but I think you have already answered that. Anything else you want to add?

M.: Hmm…I guess what I would add is that creativity / art / writing / performance is the main place where I really feel the divine. I do a lot of spiritual work in order to write and to really access the deep places of my writing. I have a particular deity that I work with in order to do that. She is an ancient goddess from the Vedas which are the oldest texts, almost pre-Hindu, 5000 years old, named Vac and she's considered in those texts to be the goddess of speech, or the Word personified into a deity. She is not really worshipped by modern Hindus but when I'm writing or performing, I feel that I tap into her energy. And the most powerful times that I've actually felt divine energy are on stage. Also I have a little altar at home that includes various little items that represent different divine energies to me.

Lea: Very interesting. This question may feel redundant (a lot of these questions are similar, but hopefully bring out different facets in your responses)...what is spirituality to you?

M.: It's interesting this is not usually a topic that comes up but somehow last weekend at this convention I ended up having a long conversation with two people about it. I was trying to explain to this guy that I don't feel like I have a religion, per se, or even a belief, exactly, but I guess my belief system is just that...let me think how I put it...like I don't actually believe in a god that is separate from me, or a me that is separate from god. I think we're all alone and we're all interconnected and both things are true at the same time because there isn't really a gap, for me, between the physical and the metaphysical reality. Like he was asking me do I believe in life after death and I was saying well, in the most obvious sense, there are all these molecules that at this moment exist as something called 'me,' and those molecules or atoms will continue to swish around somewhere, so that's what I think is also true on a metaphysical level. That the energy of us all continues, doesn't die, but it's not like this little collection of molecules is going to somehow stay the same even after "I" die.

I don't know if that's what you're looking for? I guess it's sort of Taoist or something.

Lea: What I am looking for is whatever the answer is that feels right for you...so yes, you are giving me exactly what I am looking for.

M.: OK

Lea: You are making perfect sense to me. Ok…next question...do you feel like your sexuality is a part of your spirituality, and if so, how?

M.: I feel like at the best moments my sexuality and spirituality are connected, I mean obviously that moment of orgasm it's almost a cliché but it can be like this big cosmic love merging moment, for sure I've felt that.

In a more general sense I also feel like desire is very pure and it's a spiritual impulse, like what Audre Lorde talks about in her essay on erotic power. The thing that points us toward the truth.

One of the things I really want to do is seriously be a student of tantra, I mean the Indian tantra not the California new age tantra. The latter just picked up the sex bits out of context. But the original idea of tantra was that it is possible to approach the divine through everyday experience, and particularly through experiences of what was taboo.

Lea: Exactly....do you feel like you pray? If so, what is prayer to you?

M.: Most of the time I would say I meditate, not pray. Only if I'm really desperate do I pray and I don't have a very clear sense of what it is that I'm doing at those moments. It's always strange to me afterward, that I've done it, considering that I don't really have something/someone that I believe in praying "to." It's more like part of being really really upset about something and just kind of a general "please" out to the universe, like

please make this go away, please make it all better. Or maybe just please let me survive this wave of something that seems unbearable right now.

Lea: I love what Anne Lamott says about prayer - that there are really only two prayers: "help" and "thank you."

M.: Yea, I do 'thank you' too. I feel confused by the word pray because I suspect that other people mean something specific by it that I don't understand...but it might be like hiking. For a long time I thought hiking was something special that I didn't know how to do. Then I learned it was just walking!

Lea: Lol...walking with heavy breathing. What is SM to you?

M.: Speaking of heavy breathing!

Lea: Exactly!

M.: Let's see. Well I assume you are going to cover the textbook definitions and the safe sane consensual and all that stuff. So for me it can be a lot of things, it can be fun and a game, or it can be really deep. It depends on who the person is and what my relationship with her is and how well we know each other. I'm trying to think what to say about it. Can you ask me a more specific question?

Lea: No problem...there is no right or wrong answer. Let's see...more specific...what needs to be happening in an encounter for you to call it SM?

M.: OK, good....So there needs to be a power dynamic, a power differential. As a bottom I need to feel that I am giving up some level of control. That's the first thing, which I guess is really more about the D/s part, the submissive part of me needs to have a place to come out and that place is in the trust, I don't mean trust as just an emotional relationship, but it's almost a physical thing, the sensation of trusting someone with my body.

And in that trust is a sensation of being vulnerable, of making myself or letting myself become much more vulnerable than I am in my day-to-day life. It's a kind of letting go, which is deeply relaxing, actually, even though it also brings some fear. That fear is also usually there and it's exciting, it makes it scary-exciting.

So before the person even touches me, there is all this drama and it's creating adrenaline from the fear and so on, which is somehow fun. Like going on the up part of the roller coaster. And then in order for it to be an SM encounter, I would say there usually has to be some pain. Not always because someone can do a lot with a blindfold and some penetration, but usually it's more than that, usually there's pain. And there's sex, usually some form of a sexual stimulation. The more I'm turned on, the more pain I can handle.

And the more pain, the more turned on I am. So it's a nice little cycle. And hopefully lots of orgasms along the way.

Lea: An excellent definition! Does SM feel like a connector for you between your queer self and your spiritual self? If so, how?

M.: It can be... Just sex can be too... I think that for me, the most intense moments/experiences are connectors of all my selves. So not just the queer self and the spiritual self, but also the little girl self and the grownup self, and also the artist self and the shark self and the political self... everybody gets to come (so to speak) together for that one powerful unified moment. I think it was you who told me that someone once told you a flogger is like pot whereas a cane is like heroin ... I guess it's sort of like that... there a lot of other ways to get to that transcendent moment, but SM is definitely one of the quickest, for me. But a really amazing day of writing can also feel that way.

Lea: I understand exactly what you are saying. This may seem like an odd question....does what you conceptualize as the Divine become flesh for you in SM and/or vanilla sex?

M.: I think there are moments when my lover is God, yes. And when I'm in deep subspace I feel like a supplicant or a worshipper. Like just grateful to be there, to be in the presence of that person and be allowed to serve her.

Lea: Beautiful.

M.: Yes, it is.

Lea: What has your experience of spirituality through SM or vanilla sex taught you about the nature of the divine?

M.: I don't know, I don't think of it as one thing teaching me about the other thing. I think they're both part of the same experience which is of being a human. Experiencing connection with different energies that are also part of what it is to be embodied and human and animal and divine all at the same time…if that makes any sense at all.

Lea: Yes – it makes sense. How does SM make you feel about your body?

M.: SM makes me feel great about my body. One of the last times I played, the hardest I ever played with anyone, this Top was flogging me on the upper back for a long time, and she kept checking in with me, "Are you ok? Do you want me to stop?" and I kept saying no, please don't stop, and finally she put down the flogger and she started punching me, in the shoulders, really hard. And I felt like wow, it's so amazing, that my body can do this! My body is so strong! And it wasn't even pain, because the endorphins were so strong by that point and it actually felt really good, like a hard massage, but

better, and I don't think I would have asked her to stop at all but then she said you better sit down, your legs are shaking. I had no idea my legs were shaking.

Lea: Isn't it awesome to be in a space with your body like that?

M.: Yes, especially because I often have all these body image lies about fat or hairy or whatever and SM takes that all away, so does sex, because it's just about the sensation and being in my body instead of thinking about / looking at / observing / objectifying my own body.

Lea: One of SM's greatest gifts. How does power exchange feel erotic to you?

M.: I think for me it does come back to that submission / vulnerability / trust thing. That's what is sexy, being able to give it up to another person. And also the connection - knowing that I'm giving her what she really wants, too.

Lea: How does this eroticism connect to your spiritual power?

M.: There is a part of spirituality that is also about giving it up -- to stop trying to control everything and trust that the universe or whatever will work it out the way it is supposed to go. And sometimes what takes real strength is accepting that reality.

Lea: Very true. Second to the last question...what do you wish most religious people knew about SM?

M.: That the greatest religious figures have been total submissives.

Lea: Great answer!

M.: I mean seriously. That's what the saints were all about, right? Hair shirts and self-flagellation and suffering for god and all that. I'm not joking.

Lea: I know - I agree. There is an old and much beloved evangelical Christian hymn called "Perfect Submission, Perfect Delight" We sing it often at MCCSF, and everyone always has a knowing big grin on.

M.: Haha. Yes, Hinduism has its equivalents too.

Lea: What do you with most wish religious people knew about the relationship of SM to your spirituality and/or connection with the Divine?

M.: Honestly, I think the people who are truly religious know it already. That God is everywhere, in the bedroom, in the dungeon, in the kinky section of the lingerie store... but not there to judge, not there to spy, but there to enjoy and love all the variety of

experience.

Lea: I need to know more of those kinds of truly religious people.

M.: Well, it's hard to be truly religious, I think. There's a lot of wrong religion being peddled, in my humble opinion.

Lea: That's for sure. I wholeheartedly agree with your humble opinion. And that's it for the questions....do you have anything you would like to add?

M.: Thanks Lea, good questions, very thought-provoking. I'm sure your thesis will be interesting! Good luck writing.

Notes From Phone Interview With "Master Dan," August 19, 2009

Lea: How do you identify? (Gender, race, ethnicity, religion, sexual orientation, class, age, SM orientation, physical dis/ability, etc.)?

Master Dan: Male, gay, caucasian, middle class professor, 66, Top, able-bodied.

Lea: Do you have a preferred name for God?

Master Dan: The Divine.

Lea: What is your religious background? Did you grow up in a certain faith tradition?

Master Dan: Roman Catholic.

Lea: What did this tradition teach you the most about the nature of the Divine?

Master Dan: Mystery was really important, and that has still stuck. That the Divine is very powerful; it is something one has to align oneself with to be ourselves, and to be part of a greater universe.

Lea: What did it teach you about the nature of your relationship with the Divine?

Master Dan: Part of it was that one had to be extraordinarily careful with what one did (this was the sin-based stuff). ..especially about sexuality. It had to be curtailed, because it is an energy that could destroy your relationship with the Divine. This was the biggest lie.

Lea: What did it teach you about sexuality?

Master Dan: Initially, to fear it, very simply, and to feel guilty about it.

Lea: Who/what is the Divine to you at this point in your life?

Master Dan: The Divine is still the Great powerful Holiness to me; the wholeness and the unity of everything. This hasn't changed for me since growing up. This basic notion that I learned growing up is still pretty much what I believe.

Lea: How did you come to this understanding?

Master Dan: Experientially much more than any kind of teaching or indoctrination. I never went to Catholic school, thank God. I grew up in a very tiny community with a very fundamentalist Catholic church. Indoctrination wasn't really huge, which was the

best part of my childhood. It came experientially through the mystery of the Mass and the Eucharist. Rationally, this doesn't make any sense, but it does experientially. I remember sitting in an empty church, meditating, opening myself to the Divine.

Lea: What is spirituality to you?

Master Dan: Spirituality is wholeness – a unity with myself, feeling powerful and feeling at one with myself and the world with all of its aspects, including nature. It is climbing mountains, being a part of nature, feeling connected to other human beings and opening myself to them without fear and with acceptance.

Lea: Does your sexuality feel like a spiritual part of you? If so, how?

Master Dan: Yes, because I have learned that sexuality opens me to incredible experiences with/of others. It gives me a feeling about myself that is whole.

Lea: What is prayer to you?

Master Dan: I have a hard time with prayer. I don't think I pray. The closest I feel to prayer is when I open myself to honesty, to something that is greater than myself and those things that are beyond me. Perhaps this is more meditation. I am very uncomfortable praying to a being that is watching over me – I don't like anything that smacks of the anthropomorphism of God.

Lea: What is SM to you?

Master Dan: It's fine to use SM or BDSM, either one. It is the incredible connection that one makes with another human being.

Lea: Do you pray with your body? If so, do you pray with your body and/or through SM? Through vanilla sex?

Master Dan: Absolutely. I think the worst thing that Christianity has ever done is separate the body from the soul – it is the most fundamental error of Christianity. When I meditate it is with my whole body. I said above that I don't pray, but probably because I think prayer is considered a mental state, but for me it is something I do with my whole being. I like things like Tai Chi because it involves the body and the mind. Anything that feels solely mental to me makes me withdraw.
The worst part of Catholicism for me is that it alienated my spirituality from my body.

Lea: What does it feel like when you do this?

Master Dan: I simply do the activities that feel absolutely right for me in connecting with other human beings and the world. One of the deepest spiritual experiences I ever had

came when I was hiking in the Andes. I could feel the mountains as gods, and how they care for us....but it started simply by going on the hike, and it happened to open me spiritually. The prayer happened as my body and my mind became unified, and then I felt the spiritual experience of it.

Lea: Is SM a connector for you between your queer self and your spiritual self? If so, how?

Master Dan: Yes, and not just my queer self, but my whole self. I feel it in the power exchange that really develops between myself and somebody I am playing with. Something happens at a very deep level when you are playing with someone else and it's where I as a Top/Dom/Master am feeling both extraordinarily powerful, vulnerable, and humble – it is where all the boundaries get erased. Boundaries that we make within ourselves, between others – even the boundaries between Top and bottom get erased...it is at this point that BDSM becomes a spiritual experience. I'm not sure that this is why I started playing with SM, but it is the reason I keep doing it...it is this deepening that keeps taking place that erases all these boundaries within me and between me and others.

Lea: Does the Divine become flesh for you in SM? Different in vanilla sex? If so, how?

Master Dan: I would rather say the flesh becomes divine. I really don't know what it means for the Divine to become flesh...that sends me more into a theological space. I think I become divine, and so does the bottom I am playing with.

Lea: What has your experience of spirituality through SM or vanilla sex taught you about the nature of the Divine?

Master Dan: It has affirmed that divinity is about wholeness and mystery, and feeling totally ok with the world and feeling centered. I think my old Catholicism is still intact here – it is that part that says SM has deepened my understanding of the Divine.

Lea: How does SM make you feel about your body?

Master Dan: I think it is wonderful for the body. It makes me feel like my body is a part of myself, and part of the world as a whole. It erases body/mind dualism, and it makes me feel great about my body.

Lea: How does this relate to/affect your relationship to your body?

Master Dan: I feel ageless when I do SM.

Lea: Can you tell me more about how your spirituality and sexuality feel linked to you?
Master Dan: My understanding of the link between my spirituality and my sexuality is very difficult for me to understand. But I am convinced that my sexual feelings are

absolutely united with my spiritual feelings. Sometimes I feel like the sexual energy I feel is the same as divine energy, but I really don't know how it works. The sexual energy that goes with sexuality in all of its forms reveals that we are such sensual creatures. I would prefer to call it all sensuality. I struggle with any question that just uses the word sexuality, because we tend to define what constitutes sexuality so narrowly.

I think life is basically erotic. We have pain, we go through life, we touch people, we see people. Life is erotic.

Lea: What do you most wish religious people knew about SM?

Master Dan: That is it one of the most non-exploitive relationships one can have in the world when it is done responsibly. That it is the exact opposite of one person exploiting another. Not just religious people – but anyone who isn't into the scene. I think it is a very hard thing to understand outside of the scene. But what takes place is a transformative experience between two human beings. When I play with bottoms, they often say that they feel much more empowered afterwards, and I wish people knew this, religious and non-religious.

Lea: What do you most wish they knew about the relationship of SM to your spirituality and your connection with the Divine?

Master Dan: SM is about opening oneself to connections that are way beyond oneself. I don't really care what anyone knows about my spirituality or not, but I want them to know this about SM and spirituality in general.

Appendix 3: Suggested SM Resources

Books:

Baldwin, Guy. *Ties That Bind: The SM/Leather/Fetish Erotic Style: Issues, Commentaries, and Advice.* Los Angeles, CA: Daedalus Publishing Company, 2003.

Brame, William and Gloria. *Different Loving: The World of Sexual Dominance and Submission.* New York, NY: Villard Books, 1993.

Califia, Pat. *Sensuous Magic: A Guide for Adventurous Couples.* New York, NY: Masquerade Books, 1993.

Devon, Molly and Philip Miller. *Screw the Roses, Send Me the Thorns: The Romance and Sexual Sorcery of Sadomasochism.* Mystic Rose Books, 1988.

Easton, Dossie and Janet W. Hardy. *The New Bottoming Book.* Emeryville, CA: Greenery Press, 2001.

Easton, Dossie and Janet W. Hardy. *The New Topping Book.* Oakland, CA: Greenery Press, 2003.

Harrington, Lee. *Sacred Kink: The Eightfold Paths of BDSM and Beyond.* Morville, NC: Lulu Enterprises, Inc., 2009.

Henkin, William and Sybil Holiday. *Consensual Sadomasochism: How To Talk About It and How To Do It Safely.* Los Angeles, CA: Daedalus Publishing Company, 1996.

Samois. *Coming to Power: Writing and Graphics on Lesbian SM (3rd Edition, Revised and Updated).* Alyson Books, 1982.

Wiseman, Jay. *SM 101: A Realistic Introduction.* Emeryville, CA: Greenery Press, 1998.

Organizations:

Kink Aware Professionals (KAP)

A resource for people who are seeking psychotherapeutic, medical, or legal professionals who are informed about the diversity of consensual, adult sexuality,

sponsored by the National Coalition for Sexual Freedom. Go to www.ncsfreedom.org/kap for more information.

P.L.A.Y.: People of Leather Among You

PLAY is an affinity group based in Los Angeles within Metropolitan Community Churches for people who identify as leatherfolk, or for people who are interested in exploring leather/BDSM play in their lives. PLAY serves as an educational forum for the spiritual aspects of BDSM, provides spiritual outreach to the leather /fetish community and fosters leather/fetish understanding within the larger spiritual community. For more information go to http://losangeles.tribe.net/event/PLAY-People-of-Leather-Among-You

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Boyarin, Daniel. *Carnal Israel: Reading Sex in Talmudic Culture.* Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993.

Brooten, Bernadette J. *Love Between Women: Early Christian Responses to Female Homoeroticism.* Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1996.

Burgonio-Watson, Thelma B. "How Can We Sing Our Song, and Who Will Hear? Violence Against Asian American/Immigrant Women." *Body and Soul: Rethinking Sexuality as Justice Love* ed. Marvin M. Ellison and Sylvia Thorson-Smith Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2008.

Califia, Pat. *Sensuous Magic: A Guide for Adventurous Couples.* New York, NY: Masquerade Books, 1993.

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